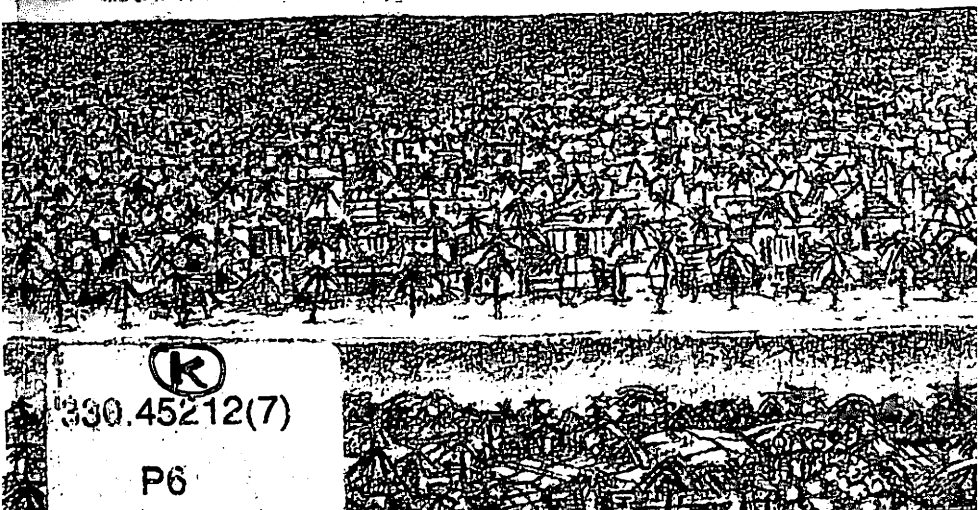
Tales of Rice

Kuttanad, Southwest India

K.T. Rammohan



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Tales of Rice
Kuttanad, Southwest India

K T Rammohan

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Preface

This monograph seeks to advance a new framework of writing economic history. It suggests that economic history should open conversations with varied branches of human sciences for a better understanding of the economic past. Currently dominant in economic history of South Asia are the macro narratives of economic change. These unravel the central tendencies of economic epochs of large regions by drawing analytic inputs primarily from economic theory. Without discounting the relevance of such narratives, the monograph argues in favour of a transdisciplinary framework that explores the economic traces: observing the micro regions, actors, processes, relationships, technologies, ideas, and commodities; tracking their passage through time; generating a multi-layered narrative of economic life capable of capturing nuances otherwise missed. The feasibility of the framework is demonstrated through a study of the rice-lands of Kuttanad in the former princely state of Travancore on India's southwest coast. The inquiry focuses on the period beginning from the mid-19th century to World War II. The analysis has two planks. First, the monograph situates the emergence of Kuttanad within the larger processes of the capitalist world-economy. Alongside the global and political economic, locally specific elements influenced the making of the Kuttanad rice-bowl. The second plank of the analysis, therefore, is the ecology, ethnography, and cultural geography of rice production in Kuttanad. This also takes the inquiry to reclaiming traces within traces: the nether economies of piracy and theft; the technology of human sacrifice.

Most of the research underlying this monograph was carried out during my two-year term as Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, from 2004 to 2006. I greatly owe to KP Kannan, former director, for the initial appointment, and to KN Nair, present director, for extension of the term. Students of M Phil

class, 2004 and 2005 were the first respondents to many ideas contained in this monograph. As with most of my writing, in completing this monograph too, I have greatly benefited from conversations with Savithri Preetha Nair. P. Cyriac Mathews, James Zacharias, and Shaji K Francis helped me in fieldwork. For helpful comments on earlier drafts, I owe to Raman Mahadevan, J Devika, MSS Pandian, and PK Michael Tharakan. On the penultimate version, Dilip M Menon offered thoughtful criticism. KT Rajagopalan edited the final draft. Encouragement and support of Tirthankar Roy, M Vijayabaskar, Sudeshna Purkayastha, and P Sanal Mohan helped in varied ways to move the project forward. To TG Jacob, I owe the title.

Special thanks are due to Tilak Baker, Publication Officer, Centre for Development Studies, for executing the word into deed.

If the most recent debate (Roy, 2004) is any indication, economic history of South Asia is untouched by the changes in the historiography of the region occurring since at least the early 1980s. Barring a few, economic historians still work with the old apparatus of historiography. This apparatus, as the subaltern historiographers have persistently reminded us, is designed for studying large phenomena, big events, and macro processes. It is incapable of engaging with "the small drama and the fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths" (Guha, 1985). Yet, enslaved by conventional notions and technologies of historical scholarship, economic historians continue to construct grand narratives of national economies and sectors. This is not to discount the need for inquiries into the central tendencies of economic epochs of nations and large regions. Such inquiries, however, are ideally, empirically inspired exercises in historical abstraction distinct from the non-reflexive, grand narratives that numerically dominate now. The current impasse in economic history of South Asia owes, at least partly, to the dominance of the historiography of grand narratives – even if this historiography stands ideologically divided.

Evidently, only a critical project may break the impasse. What could be the form and content of such a project? Just as we cannot think of a

single, common history of South Asian music, painting, literature, war, repression, resistance or else, a single economic history of South Asia is inconceivable — even the shared experience of colonialism considered. A critical project in economic history of South Asia, preferably, picks up the micro regions, actors, processes, relationships, ideas, and commodities tracking their passage through time. This would yield an understanding not only of economic traces hitherto unrecognised but also through them, of larger processes. Importantly, the critical project stays away from conventional regional and sub-regional histories, which tend to be histories of macro processes as reflected in a locality and cast in a similar mould as the grand narratives of large regions. Nor shall a critical project be cocooned in the 'local', as some regional histories tend to be.

Yet, the new project of picking up the economic traces cannot, by its very conception, be confined to "reclaiming for history" (Guha, 1985) or be content with "redefining the link [between economics and history]" (Roy, 2004). Rather, it calls for transgressing the disciplinary boundaries (Rammohan, 2005). An early recognition of the need for transdisciplinarity in understanding economic change is evinced in the agrarian studies project of Scott and his associates, some of which relate to South Asia. The project engaged with "the lived experience of the peoples ... to understand what was distinctive and what was generic [about these experiences]". As economic history has to consider societies rural and otherwise, how do we carry forward these insights to non-rural sites? How do we engage with societies like Kerala, characterised as 'rurban'? Even while continuing to be dissatisfied with the "thin (if elegant) reasoning of formal, economistic theories" (Scott, 2002: 1-2), could we incorporate specific genres of economic thinking to come up with a richer story — especially since the substance of the story is economic change?

A critical project as outlined here demands transdisciplinary frameworks to view the economic past. Several disciplines come in handy

to the economic historian. One is classical political economy – including but not merely its Marxist variety — that conceives the society as comprising different classes, focuses on their inter-relationships, and examines their roles and shares in the creation and distribution of economic surplus, locally and globally. The choice of political economy among different strands of economic thinking is guided by its approximation to economic sociology. Another discipline is ethnography that thinks through the material processes and associated people and explores the meaning of everyday economic practices and transactions. A third is political ecology, especially relevant in knowing how environment links with classes and class relations, forms of state intervention, organisation of labour, practices of labour control and modes of resistance. Yet another discipline is cultural geography that addresses spatial distribution of things, ways of life, systems of meaning, orders of practice, and notions of power (Atkinson *et al*, 2005: vii-viii). There could be several other human sciences that could aid understanding the economic past.

A transdisciplinary project of reclaiming economic traces calls for new set of sources and new reading of conventional sources. While official, archival sources continue to be important, the economic historian pursuing the new project has to especially look for folk material that yield micro, spatial, ethnographic insights and also, attempt spatial and ethnographic reading of archival material. Second, a nuanced prioritisation of newspaper archives is necessary. As important as or even more important than national and provincial newspapers are the small, sub-provincial, regional language newspapers that abound in local details. Again, the research eye is turned not merely towards articles, reports, and editorials but also towards advertisements, letters to editor penned often by non-celebrities and seemingly trivial, local accounts. Family histories, land records and maps, wills, private papers, pamphlets, biographies and autobiographies, and fiction prove useful. Over and above these, fieldwork is a crucial component in the execution of the transdisciplinary project.

This monograph makes a case for a new, transdisciplinary narrative of economic change in South Asia that focuses on the micro regions, processes, relationships, and actors but without compromising on the influence of the 'large' in shaping the micro. The micro region illustrated to establish the case is the coastal rice-lands in southwest India, Kuttanad in the former princely state of Travancore, currently a part of Kerala State. Kuttanad rice-fields were created by reclaiming — enclosing and draining the backwater — and cultivation was carried out below sea level. The development of Kuttanad was not an isolated, local happening as most of the available accounts of the region view it, but one that is inseparable from global economic processes. While reclamation of backwaters for rice cultivation in Kuttanad has a history spanning centuries, it assumes a qualitatively new profile beginning from the late 19th century. The inquiry begins at this time-point marked by an agrarian organisation comprising lords and servile labourers and extends to the period of World War II that induced important changes in the equations of power in the regional and local economies.

The analysis has two planks. First, the study seeks to situate the emergence of Kuttanad in the context of the larger economic processes of the capitalist world-economy. Alongside the global and political economic, there were important local, ecological, ethnographic, and spatial elements in the making of the Kuttanad rice-bowl. The second plank of the analysis, therefore, is the ecology, ethnography, and cultural geography of rice production in Kuttanad. This also takes the inquiry to reclaiming traces within traces: the nether economies of piracy and theft and the technology of human sacrifice.

The monograph is organised in XII sections. Section I traces the circulation of rice in the world-system. It talks of the separate circulations of rice in Asia and Europe and their fusion from the mid-19th century. Section II focuses on the global integration of Travancore economy and its implications for local production of rice. Sections III to XI detail the

intertwining aspects of ethnography, ecology, and cultural geography of rice production in Kuttanad. The concluding section XII re-asserts, as empowered by the Kuttanad exercise, the need for and possibility of a historiography that transgresses the boundaries of the conventional economic history and generates a multi-layered narrative of economic life in the past – but one that does not stake claim to being the single, objective truth about the past.

I

World-flows of Rice

As soon as one looks at the question of grain one realises what a complicated phenomenon it is. (Braudel, 1981: 109)

Rice had different meanings to those living in Europe and Asia and to the different social sections within both regions. For Europeans, the prayer was for the daily bread – made of wheat but also of rye or millet. Ancient Europe used rice only in ceremonial functions and for therapeutic purposes. At certain times and in certain places rice was even considered an item of luxury the demand for which varied directly rather than indirectly with price. Such quantities of rice required were transported from Asia across the Indian Ocean. Subsequently, the Arab traders introduced rice in Spain. From about the 15th century, rice comes to have much larger but profane demand. It was used as pig-feed and in the brewing industry – though it was not used for making the best spirits. Subsequently rice became an input also for starch and paper industries.

Responding to greater demand, Europe started growing rice beginning from the 15th century. Italy was the pioneer. Initially organised under the feudal scheme of production, cultivation of rice soon acquired the attributes of capitalist production employing wage labour in vast estates, some of these measuring up to 1000 hectares. The produce was

sold at a low price in the market at Ferrara. In Northern Europe, during the winter-days when barley and peas were unavailable, common people and livestock took to rice. For certain social groups even more disadvantaged, rice was not merely a winter food. "Its greatest food use in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was as a versatile and relatively cheap dietary staple, especially useful for feeding the commoners and *lumpen* groups – orphans, soldiers, sailors, inmates, the poor – in the absence of, or instead of, other cereals". In France, rice was served in hospitals, military barracks and ships. For the middle-class, however, rice was never the staple. Nevertheless, it was "a ready nutritional complement or supplement" (Coclanis, 1993: 1052). It supplemented but never substituted wheat and rye bread. Apparently, rice never made it to the dining tables of the elites. They considered it the food of the poor and the pigs. At best, it was "an emergency foodstuff" (Braudel, 1981: 110-111). For the elite, pursuing a lifestyle that would mark them off from the commoners, diet was critical to distinctiveness. To them, everything coarse and plebeian became anathema (Schivelbusch, 1993: 7-8).

Rice was consumed in varied ways. In 16th century Venice, rice flour was mixed with other flours to make bread to feed the poor during famines. Rice was mixed with millet "so that [the poor] could be satisfied from one meal to the next". In Parisian churches, for the poor, low-quality rice was mixed with mashed turnips, pumpkins, and carrots. Such was the severity of poverty that the saucepans were never washed so as not to waste the leftovers and 'deposit'. On the rare occasions the rich took rice, they had it cooked in milk.

While Italy continued to be a major producer, America's southeast, especially South Carolina and later Louisiana, emerged as new centres of rice production. Initially, rice from South Carolina was shipped through the port of Georgetown to England and West Indies. Rice exported to England was mostly re-exported to Europe. Northern Europe, especially

Holland and the German States were the major consumers, and to a lesser extent, Southern Europe, especially Spain and Portugal. France relied on cheaper rice from Turkey and Brazil. By the early 18th century, South Carolina had grown into a major rice-exporting region and we find its Governor writing to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations that the region "hath made more rice ye Last Cropp then [sic] we have ships to transport"(Boyle, 2005). This was despite the fact that maize, cotton, and tobacco continued to be the principal crops of the region (Warman, 2003: 157-70).

The physical environment of South Carolina was conducive to rice-cultivation. Rice was cultivated in the lower coastal plains characterised by humid subtropical climate, abundant precipitation, and water resources. Extensive tracts of river swamps were turned into rice-fields with the use of slave labour. Planters preferred slaves from the African coast where rice growing had been a major agricultural activity since at least the 16th century. People living near the floodplains of coastal estuaries between Gambia and Sierra Leone had devised a system of canals, sluices and dykes to enclose the mangrove swamps and regulate the entry of ocean tides to grow rice. The significance of African slave labour in rice-cultivation is vouched for by the fact that by 1730, when South Carolina experienced its first rice boom, two-thirds of the population was slaves. In 1739, South Carolina witnessed a slave uprising, the Stono rebellion, considered "the largest slave rebellion in Colonial American history" (Boyle, 2005).

The American Revolution (1765-88) temporarily disrupted rice trade and therefore production but South Carolina maintained its position as the leading producer of rice right through the 17th and a good part of the 18th century. During the late 18th century, however, South Carolina lost the Portuguese market to Brazil, and some other segments of the European market, to Italy. Yet, with better technologies of water draining, cultivation expanded. With larger planters buying out small planters, the

period also saw the consolidation of large holdings. By 1840, the share of slaves in the population of Georgetown had risen to about 90 per cent.

While the 1850s was a decade of unprecedented profitability, the subsequent decades were not favourable to the rice planters. The Abolition of Slavery (1863) eroded the cheap, disciplined labour-base of production (Boyle, 2005a). Not only did South Carolina lose out on its traditional technologies of accumulation like slavery but it also failed to catch up with the new agricultural technologies. The muddy soil of South Carolina did not allow mechanisation to the extent that other regions did. Louisiana, for instance, introduced methods of wheat agriculture to produce rice. The Midwestern farmers and land speculators who moved in there used Japanese seed, seeders, disc and twine binders, gang ploughs, and harvesters that substantially reduced direct labour. Louisiana and Georgia soon surpassed South Carolina in rice-production. Further, new rice-growing areas like Texas and Arkansas emerged. By 1900, over 90 per cent of American rice production was contributed by Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. South Carolina moved into a new phase of the economy by shifting to extractive industries like forest timber felling and phosphate mining (Boyle, 2005a). Even while new production centres emerged and production rose, exports of rice from America stagnated right through the 19th century. Not only was the United States being edged out from foreign markets, foreign rice was beginning to reach the American shore. By 1855, considerable quantities of Java rice were being shipped to America. In the period that followed, the Asian and European trading systems of rice were fused into one encompassing the entire globe. Rice-trade of global proportions was established.

If for people living in the core regions wheat was the king, for people in the periphery, rice ruled the diet. Monsoon Asia was the chief rice-growing region in the periphery. India, Burma, Siam, Indo-China, Cochin China (southern Vietnam), and Java were especially suited for rice-cultivation. With a wide range of seeds that allowed rice to be grown

on the seacoast to about 10000 feet up in the mountains, most of Asia was self-sufficient in rice (Hanks, 1972: 23-43). Beginning from the mid-19th century, with the intense integration of most Asian regions into the world-market as producers of cheap food and raw material for the Western nations, the Asian rice was turned into an article of consumption in Europe. For Europe, despite costs of long distance transportation and the chain of intermediaries involved, whose margins would add on to the price, rice from Asia worked out cheaper. Land and labour were cheap in the periphery; family labour was often not accounted for. Further, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the spread of new shipping technology using steam-power helped faster and economic transit of this perishable commodity from the East to the West. The shipping time between Bombay and London, for instance, was reduced to one month from the earlier five to eight months consequent to the opening of the Suez. By 1914, with steam vessels, it was further reduced to two weeks. Tramp shipping rates fell by half between 1869 and 1914 (Headrick, 1988: 23-26). With the laying of the transatlantic cable from Britain to North America and submarine cables connecting Bombay with London, and Singapore, Batavia, Saigon, Hong Kong, and Shanghai being linked soon after, an international communication network was in place. This strongly reinforced the global rice-market by linking together traders situated across the world and by developing futures markets.

Consequently, rice-peasants located in the remotest villages of Asia were drafted into the world-market. Within Asia, India (including Burma, which was its province from 1886 to 1937) was the chief exporter of rice. It was grown in different parts of the country: in peninsular India, the lower Indus valley, the Gangetic delta and the lower valley. Bengal Province emerged as the most important export-producer, shipping rice through Calcutta and Rangoon. Most of Bengal's exports went to other Indian regions, often for re-exports. Shipment from Calcutta was mostly to Bombay and to a lesser extent, to Madras. It also went further south to Cochin and Ceylon. By 1867-68, shipment of rice from Burma exceeded

that of Bengal. Burmese rice went mostly to Britain, from where it was shipped to Europe. While Britain was the foremost buyer, Germany surpassed her by the late 19th century. Holland too was a major market though in competition with Java rice. While in Europe Burmese rice was used mainly for industrial purposes, it formed "a natural reservoir for the entire rice-consuming regions of the world in times of scarcity". From 1863 to 1865, when China was hit by scarcity — made worse by the poor crops in Siam that was its regular external source — rice was shipped from Burma. The worst effects of the 1867-68 famine in Orissa and Ganjam were averted by the import of Burmese rice through the ports of Calcutta and Madras. Japan took rice from Burma if the situation demanded it. Rice from Siam and Cochin China went to Japan, China, Java, and the Straits Settlements. For most of the 19th century, a good part of the Burmese export went to Europe. Over time, the share shipped to Europe declined and most of the Burmese rice was being exported to India and Ceylon. As with Burma, in both Siam and Indo-China, rice was the most important export article, accounting for more than half the value of total exports. France took almost all the Indo-Chinese rice that reached Europe. Indo-China also supplied Philippines, and along with Siam, to countries further east. Importantly, from mid-19th century, there was a rise in demand for rice from within Asia imparting buoyancy to long-distance regional trade within the continent.

As Asian colonies were cast as suppliers of cash crops, minerals, and primary-processed industrial products to Europe, many of these regions began to experience shortage of rice which was met by import from surplus-producing regions. Parts of India, Ceylon, and Dutch East Indies where immigrant labour was involved in non-food production were especially dependent on imported rice. Dietary preferences travelled with people and the trade routes of rice were often ethnically constituted. Bengal rice found its way to wherever Bengali labourers had emigrated. Ceylon, therefore, was an important buyer of Bengal rice although Burmese rice too could be obtained as easily. Likewise, the migrant

Chinese labourers working in the mines and plantations in the Straits Settlements and in the Dutch East Indies preferred Siamese rice (Latham, 1988:91).

Singapore and Hong Kong were the key redistribution centres in international rice trade. Singapore was the meeting point of the eastward-bound rice from Burma and the westward-bound rice from Indo-China and Siam. At Singapore, the rice was redistributed, mainly to the Dutch East Indies and the Malay Peninsula. Hong Kong was an important redistribution centre for the Far East. American trading interests established the first steam-powered rice-mill in Siam by 1858 (Coclanis, 1993: 1071). In Siam, the Chinese traders too were active handling rice exports to Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Malaya and other Asian markets. European trading firms based in Bangkok mostly handled exports to Europe.

How were the cultivators of rice-exporting monsoon Asia linked up with the world-market? The case of Burma is illustrative — at least in broad aspects of political economy. Between the early 1870s and the late 1900s, induced by rise in world-demand, the area under rice in Lower Burma expanded over six-fold. Most of the rice grown was conveyed to Rangoon from where it was exported. Metropolitan, European firms controlled the rice-trade to Europe, Africa, and the Americas. These firms, mostly from Liverpool, London, Hamburg, and Bremen had established themselves in Rangoon from the 1850s. They set up the first, modern rice-mills in Burma. By 1881, 49 rice-mills had been established; of these, 41 were owned by European capitalists. The rest of the world-trade – essentially regional trade within Asia — was in the hands of peripheral, immigrant capital, namely, Chinese and Indian. Chinese were engaged in exports to the Straits Settlements and to China and Japan. Indian merchants exported to ports in South Asia and the Dutch East Indies.

Export firms were linked to the peasant-cultivators through a long supply-chain comprising millers, big traders, landlords, local traders,

shopkeepers, agents, and brokers. Within the European milling community, four firms dominated, exercising critical influence in the market. Over time, as rice-trade further expanded, smaller mills were established in upcountry. The number of small mills in the interior rose from 27 in 1900 to 528 in 1930 (as cited in Brown, 2005: 32ff). The scale of operations of upcountry mills, however, was much smaller than the rice-mills in Rangoon. The upcountry mills were owned, initially, mostly by Chinese and Indian capital. Subsequently, Burmese capital moved in. Even though Burmese were involved in large numbers in rice-trade, it was mostly in the first stage of the commodity flow – from the threshing floor to the local trader.

Critical to the rice supply-chain was financing. While European banks financed the export firms, smaller banks and moneylenders financed the internal trade segment. Especially prominent in financing was a section of the immigrant Indian capital, the Nattukotta Chettiar from southern India, for whom financing rice cultivation and trade was the primary activity. Till the 1880s, they were confined to Rangoon but subsequently spread out to smaller centres by establishing agencies. This led to the situation where "there was a Chettiar within a day's journey of every cultivator in the main parts of the delta". By the end of the 1920s, the Chettiars directly provided more than half the total value of crop loans in Lower Burma. Besides, they funded local lenders, and this considered the share rises to two-thirds (Brown, 2005: 14-15).

The international price of rice was highly sensitive to own production, prices and production of other cereals like wheat and small grain, and even tubers like potato. Futures market, oligopoly, and speculation complicated it even further. Consequently, international rice trade was full of expectations and disappointments, windfalls and losses. Note the anticipations, strategies, and the final disappointment of a London broker of 1872:

Towards the end of August ... it became manifest that extensive potato disease existed in this country, whereby it was calculated, not more than one half of the quantity grown would be available for consumption. In consequence of this and of continuous heavy rains in Scotland, and in the North of England, speculators were attracted by the low prices of rice, which it was anticipated would be consumed in large quantities as a substitute for potatoes, and in consequence an extensive business was done, notwithstanding the large excess of rice afloat, as compared with previous years ... Had there been a corresponding failure of the potato crop on the Continent, buyers' expectations would very probably have been realized, but the contrary being the case, and the grain markets ruling at moderate rates, a marked decline in the value of rice was the inevitable result (as cited in Latham and Neal, 1983: 273).

Besides fluctuating price, loss in transit was a major problem. This could arise from bad weather or from damage caused by pests. Myers, an early 20th century zoologist, travelling in a rice-ship coming from Calcutta via Rangoon and Trinidad and bound for Cuba, noted that there were as many as 42 species of insects in the ship – despite the ship having been fumigated twice during her voyage. Five years after the voyage, in 1934, Myers published a scientific paper, 'The Arthropod Fauna of a Rice-ship, trading from Burma to the West Indies' in the prestigious *The Journal of Animal Ecology* (Myers, 1934).

Where did the southwest Indian princely state of Travancore figure in the world-flows of rice? Lieutenants Ward and Conner, who surveyed Travancore as a part of the Great Trigonometric Survey of India from 1816 to 1820 reported that that "sufficient of the article [rice was] raised [in Travancore] to answer its own consumption" (Ward and Conner, 1863: 83). Over 30 per cent of the land under cultivation was rice-land. It was cultivated extensively both in the coastal wetlands and in the lower hills.

Beginning from the mid-19th century, however, Travancore became a net importer of rice drawing supply from the Asian trading system: from Bengal, Burma, and Siam.[1] Coastal firms – Metropolitan, European firms involved in planting, trading, and manufacturing on the Malabar coast– were the main importers of rice from Burma and adjoining regions. There were also a few Indian, immigrant merchant firms – especially the Cutch firm of Wallibhoy Kadirbhoy – engaged in import trade.

The import firms supplied rice to wholesale dealers in the towns, who, in turn, sold to smaller dealers in provincial centres. The imported, husked rice was largely the polished mill variety towards which local people were not favourably disposed. Import firms owning plantations, and plantation firms that bought rice from them, distributed it to workers who were mostly immigrants from the Tamil country. A large share of the imported rice was thus consumed in the highlands and midland. As with plantations, many coir mat-weaving factories had food stores selling rice where payment was set off against wages.

Rice-importing coastal firms were financed by the Imperial Bank, which extended 'key loans' worth 75 per cent of the value of the consignment as advance for three to six months. The advance was made at 8 per cent interest. Next in importance to the coastal firms in rice import trade were the western Indian merchants, the Gujarati Hindu and Cutch Muslim family firms in Alleppey and Cochin, who drew supplies mostly from British India, through the port of Cochin. They were financed by small banks and *Hundi* (local bills of exchange) merchants. Usually the loans were for 30 days and carried interest at 12 to 15 per cent (GoT, 1930: 85).

In sum, Travancore was self-sufficient in rice till about the mid-19th century. By the early 1870s, import of rice represented a quarter of Travancore's all imports. This rose to nearly half of all imports by 1914. What caused the change, first from self-sufficiency in rice to external dependence and further, to extreme dependence?

II

Feeding an Export-production Machine

[Backwater reclamation] is not only highly romantic but from the point of view of economic development one of the most important things in Travancore history.

Sardar KM Panikkar (Pillai and Panikar, 1965: 17)

The period from the mid-19th century marks an especially expansive phase of the world-economy. So was it for the peripheral zones like Travancore drafted into the world-economy. Between 1850 and 1910, while world-trade increased around 10-fold (in value-terms), the external trade of Travancore expanded about 24 times. Its trade surplus grew by 20 times. The population of Travancore had increased only a little over three-fold during this period. The region had been inter-linked with the world-market from the first millennium but the intensity and scale of 19th century integration broke all records.

The change was not merely quantitative. While earlier it was largely gathered produce and surplus commodity that were exported, now production began to be oriented primarily for the world-market. This was reflected in the commodity-structure of export. Earlier, export from Travancore was mostly confined to spices and timber. Beginning from the mid-19th century, a wide range of commodities like coffee, tea, rubber, coir mats, and salt-fish began newly filling in the export basket. This was besides the rise in volume of traditional exports like spices and 'neo-traditional' (dating possibly from the 16th century) exports such as copra (dried coconut), coconut oil, jaggery, and coir yarn. While an overwhelming share of the exports was to the core zones, some of the traditional and 'neo-traditional' exports found way to other peripheries, including British India. The economic implications of the new international trade were distinct from earlier trade. While remunerative export prices could have induced expanding cultivation during earlier

times, nearly a one-to-one correspondence between foreign trade and local production was now set in place.

An obvious prerequisite for trade expansion of this order was an increased scale and range of commodity production. It also required new technologies of production and transport. The changes were well reflected on the landscape of Travancore. To give a quick overview: the dense rainforests and rolling grasslands in the highlands were cleared to establish plantations for growing coffee and tea; the planters were Europeans – mostly from the highlands of Scotland — and the labourers almost entirely from the drought-prone dry lands of southern Tamil country; subsequently, as rubber cultivation began to spread, the lower forests in the midland, parts of which were used to grow rice, also disappeared; with the coming of coir mat weaving factories and coconut oil-mills, the old seaport-town of Alleppey changed from being a trading town to an industrial town; coir spinning had been carried out through a few centuries, but coir mat weaving was entirely new to the region; the big wooden handlooms on which coir mat was woven were worked jointly by seven or eight workers and each factory had many such; as the advent of weaving factories raised the demand for coir yarn, spinning became a prominent economic activity; this was done entirely by women, in villages by the side of backwaters; the rise in demand for yarn induced technological change from spinning by hand to spinning by wheel; unlike the traditional oil-press, the new oil-mills were not worked by oxen; these used steam-powered, and later, oil-powered motors that could run as many as 50 presses at a time; local capital found its way to coconut oil milling and yarn spinning; like the highland plantations, Metropolitan, European capital owned the big coir factories; labour for both coir factories and coconut oil-mills was drawn from the surrounding countryside and subsequently settled in town; they were mostly of lower castes, largely Ezhavas; in the interior, with the rise in demand for the entire range of coconut products – coconut, copra, coconut oil, coir fibre, coir yarn, coir mats – coconut cultivation expanded in scale and intensity;

coconuts had to reach the market towns; coir husk and fibre had to reach the village spinning sites; yarn had to be carried from the villages to the factory-town; and plantations had to convey their produce to the port and rice had to be conveyed back; a networked system of waterways and roads and faster ways of travel therefore emerged; the seaport at Alleppey was born anew with new pier and lighthouse and steamers called in, steamboats were introduced in the backwaters and the traditional canoes multiplied; the first steamboats were owned by European capital; new roads were built to connect the coast with the highlands and along the midland connecting these; motor-buses for public transport and motor-cars of European planters began plying these roads (Rammohan, 1996: 51-145 and 2003).

What were the implications of the new, post-mid 19th century, commodity economy for rice? First, it raised the demand for food. The workers in the highland plantations were immigrants and represented incremental demand. Normal demographic expansion also represented new demand. Between 1850 and 1920, Travancore's population increased over three-fold – from around 12 lacs to 40 lacs.[2] Like the plantation workers, the workers engaged in coir weaving factories in towns and in full-time coir spinning in the countryside, represented sections not engaged in food production but who had to be provided food.[3] Besides them, there were workers engaged in the transport sector. The state public works department employed 10000 workers in 1865; this doubled within three decades (Kabir, 2002: 138). Further, with commercialisation and industrialisation of the economy, as workers were settled in towns and market-centres, they lost access to the earlier diet of tubers, freely available in the countryside but not usually marketed. The workers' diet became more rice-centric causing the demand to rise.

Alongside raising demand, the new export economy impacted on the supply of rice. The plantations were developed by opening up the forests. The forests on the lower hills were important sites of shifting

cultivation of rice. Both tribals and non-tribals used to engage in shifting cultivation. The state owned most of these lands; the rest were with landlords. Since the soil contained a rich deposit of decayed vegetation, the yield on the hill-slopes was high – if one could believe some reports, even 30-fold and more. Over 40 varieties of rice were specially marked for rice-cultivation in the hills. What share of Travancore's rice needs were met by shifting cultivation on hill-slopes is not known. Going by indirect evidence, it was not negligible. It was reported towards the close of the second decade of the 19th century that about 1000 square miles of hill-slopes were under cultivation of rice. Beginning from the 1870s, in order to make these lands available for plantations, the government imposed increasing restrictions on hill-cultivation of rice. This often led to violent conflicts between the European planters newly entering and local people who had been cultivating rice in these patches. By the 1890s, land under hill-cultivation was reduced to less than 800 square miles. Finally, with the spread of rubber that was especially grown in lower hills, bringing new lands under hill-rice was completely banned in 1911. An important internal source of rice thus disappeared (Rammohan, 1996: 68-70).

How could the export economy be fed in such a situation of dwindling supply and rising demand for rice? Not only the export economy had to be fed but also it had to be fed cheap so that the products were price-competitive in the international market. Many other Asian colonies were producing the same commodities as Travancore. For instance, Travancore had to compete with Ceylon in a range of commodities – especially in tea, coffee, and coir. In rubber it had to compete with Malay; in spices with several countries. Rising price of food would have pushed up wages and turned Travancore's products uncompetitive.

A shortage of rice and rise in food price was averted by three important measures. First, the systematic propagation cassava

(manioc/maniot) as a cheap, new, food crop, especially for the poor. Cassava could supplement rice; the poor even substituted it. A widely held view is that the crop is of Brazilian origin and the Portuguese introduced it in Malabar. The Brazilian origin of the crop itself is debated and varyingly the origin has been attributed to Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, and Colombia. Alternate view of its introduction in India credits the British of the late 1780s and traces its cultivation in Travancore to the 1840s. The 1860s' famine is said to have popularised it in several parts of India as famine food (Preetha, 2005). State encouragement for cassava cultivation and its extensive spread in Travancore clearly dates to the 1860s. The first prince of Travancore even wrote and circulated a pamphlet on cassava cultivation. It is possible that besides Travancore's fertile land yielding a range of crops without difficulty, it was cassava that saved Travancore from the worst effects of the 1860s' famine.

Slowly it came to be known that cassava was an empty, starchy food lacking in nutrients, and that its cultivation was degrading to soil. During the 1940s, the state public health laboratory in the capital, after a series of experiments, reported that a diet comprising entirely cassava tended to impede human growth. Yet, by then, cultivation of cassava had spread extensively in Travancore. Encouragement by the state was only one of the contributing factors.[4] Cassava had agro-economic advantages. It could be grown even in a small patch of the homestead or garden land. Alternatively, it could be grown in the field between two crops of rice. The plant could flourish "on soils so poor and under attacks of droughts and pests so severe that all other crops perish" (Jones, 1969: 4). Cassava could be sun-dried or par-boiled for longer shelf life. While raw tuber was spoilt after three-four days, covered under earth it could last a week. Cassava, sliced and sun-dried, could be kept for six months while par-boiled and dried chips could last a full year. Both kinds could be pounded into flour. It could be mixed with other flour. Raw or dried, cassava could be easily cooked; it could be eaten as such or with a small helping of chillies or fish.

By 1921, half the food needs of Travancore were met by cassava.[5] Cassava marked the desperate attempt of midland poor peasants and landless agricultural workers to gain some level of self-sufficiency in food. Further, the crop being plentiful, there was a surplus to sell and rice and provision got in exchange. Cassava formed an important part of the diet of workers in plantations and factories.[6] In 1931, it was noted: "In the case of the labourers, tapioca is the chief food stuff" (GoT, 1932: 168). Like rice in Europe, in the case of cassava, the local elite chose to be distinctive by abstinence. By the early 1940s, cassava loomed so large in the diet of the common people that a member of the Travancore state assembly wishfully exclaimed that cassava, together with local rice could help the region to do away with imported rice altogether (GoT, 1943: 124). Its industrial significance was revealed during World War II. The war disrupted the supply of European and American starch to the textile mills in Ahmedabad and Bombay, prompting them to turn to Travancore cassava to manufacture starch. This caused the price of cassava to rise. Disruption of rice import owing to the war hiked the price of rice, which in turn further caused the price of cassava to rise. The government, therefore, issued orders fixing the price of cassava and prohibiting its exports to other parts of India. As part of 'Grow More Food' campaign, the government even released 50000 acres of forest reserve for the cultivation of rice and cassava (GoT-C, 1952: 1-25)

For Travancore, a second recourse to counter shortage of rice was to draw it from the Asian trading system.[7] Rice could be imported from rice-rich regions like Bengal, Burma, and Siam. In 1870-71, the share of rice and paddy (unhusked rice) in import of all kinds to Travancore was around 25 per cent. This rose to nearly 46 per cent by 1913-14 (GoT: *TAR*, respective years). Between 1869 and 1914 there occurred a 165-fold increase in the value (at current prices) of rice and paddy imported. Burmese rice was imported through all the four major ports – Alleppey, Quilon, Trivandrum, and Colachel – during the importing season, that is, January to April. Burmese rice was also received through the Cochin

port. Rice from British India was imported throughout the year (GoT, 1930: 85). By the early 1930s, imported rice formed as much as a quarter of the total consumption of rice in Travancore. What is more, import had a crucial role in determining internal price of rice. The fact was officially recognised:

> *[T]he price of paddy in Travancore is determined by the price at which the Burmese rice grower can afford to sell it in this country ... The failure of a crop in Burma would raise prices here to any extent and threaten the country with starvation (GoT, 1932: 104).*

A third imperative to meet the shortage was to increase local production by bringing new lands under rice cultivation. With a good part of highlands and midland set apart for plantations and other cash crops, this was possible only in the coastal land. The thickly populated coastal land, crowded with coconut trees, too had nearly reached the limits of rice-cultivation. New rice-growing lands, therefore, had to be literally created. Towards this, backwaters were reclaimed and turned into rice-fields. Reclamation of shallow backwaters was being carried on for long, but it attained literally deep and vast dimensions only with the state directly encouraging it. In 1874, Visakham Tirunal, the first prince of Travancore spoke from the dais of the Trivandrum Debating Society: "the home-grown paddy does not suffice to feed our people ... Yet, no attempt worth the name is made to increase the area of this cultivation by reclaiming wastelands" (Tirunal, 1874: 4).

Beginning from the 1880s, the state not only allowed but actively encouraged and assisted reclamation of backwaters for growing rice. Thus was born the rice-bowl of Kuttanad. While rice from Kuttanad did not enter the world-market, it greatly facilitated the participation of the Travancore economy in the world-market. Together with cassava and imported rice, rice produced in Kuttanad helped to keep the price of foodstuff in Travancore under check. While imported rice was consumed largely in the export production sector, locally produced rice satisfied

the dietary preference of people not favourably disposed towards polished, mill variety rice that was imported. The rice harvested in Kuttanad was mostly sold on the threshing floor. Rice-pounding traders (*puzhungalkar*) from within Kuttanad picked it up. They engaged women-workers who hand-pounded the paddy into rice after boiling and sun-drying it. The rice so produced was carried in canoes to the nearby market towns of Alleppey and Changanacherry and sold to wholesale dealers in rice. Or else, paddy was taken to Alleppey and pounded in steam-powered mills.[8] From the Alleppey market, rice was picked up by traders from smaller towns, especially by traders from upland centres like Palai, Muvattupuzha, Mundakkayam, and Kanjirappally, which were centres of cash crop production and grew very little rice.

Consequent to increased imports and local production and the introduction of cassava, the price of rice in Travancore declined through the 19th and early part of the 20th century. Between 1874 and 1904, the price of different kinds of rice fell by 10 to 15 per cent. The price fall continued up to the period of World War I. In 1908-09, imported rice cost British Rupees (Bh Rs) 10.05 per cwt. This fell by more than half, to Bh Rs 4.85 by 1913-14 (Krishnan, Krishnaji, Panikar, 1978: 15). The fall in price of food kept the wages under check enabling the export-oriented plantation and industrial sectors of Travancore to produce cheap and compete in the fiercely competitive world-market.

This is not to affirm that these measures – import of rice, propagation of cassava, and creating new rice-land – were part of a consciously thought out policy of the princely government to render export production cheap and competitive. Clearly yet, there is a pattern. The shaping of the new export economy and the initiation of new economic processes, by necessity, generated these changes in the economy. Consequently, ensuring cheap and adequate supply of food was thrust upon the state as a policy-objective.

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III

'The Miracle of the Rice-fields'

Black clouds fostered and fondled by summer shed their tears,
the shores of the lagoons swayed,
while there stood the brave one, his mind unperturbed by the thunder-storm,
his feet unswerving in the wild roaring billows, his hands unwearied;
the brave one stood there,
invoking with magic chants the lords of grains who would shower plenty on virgin land,
rousing her and filling her with grain and gold.
His orders became dams and dykes, his thoughts manifested as a thousand farmhands,
With brushwood and brambles they erected the dykes,
the lagoons drew back and yielded the fertile land, saying,
as the sea once said to a Rama long ago:
O Kesava, may your hands be fruitful, be fruitful;
Immortal thoughts are indeed the glory of the earth;
make you this earth rich with grain and fruit!
O Kesava, may your hands be fruitful!
(Paniker, 1985: 39-40)

Excited by the techniques of rice-cultivation, Braudel referred to "the miracle of the rice-fields". With rice-fields themselves created by draining the backwaters, rice-cultivation in Kuttanad was truly miraculous. The Kuttanad backwaters was vast and deep; it had strong winds and sea-like tides. Reclamation in such conditions was an arduous task and fraught with the risk of failure. The technology of reclamation under such difficult conditions owes to the depressed caste Pulayas. With all land in the hands of upper castes and communities, state and temples,

Pulayas and other landless castes were forced to live on the peripheral patches of the lord's holdings or to settle in common land. The silt washed down by rivers often formed new landmass in the backwaters and Pulayas occupied these. Alongside, they reclaimed small patches of the river-swamps and very shallow portions of the backwater for sustenance cultivation. Pulayas evolved the fundamental principles of the technology of reclamation under these conditions. It is important to emphasise this because nearly all available scholarly accounts of Kuttanad accord the credit for reclamation to "enterprising farmers" of Nayar and Syrian Christian communities disregarding the pioneering role of Pulayas. There is evidence of a Syrian Christian family obtaining a stretch of reclaimed land free from a Pulaya during the early decades of the 19th century (Kamalasanan, 1993: 35-36). Eventually, when Nayars and Christians with an eye on accumulation undertook reclamation on a large scale, they turned Pulayas into slave labour. Nayars and Christians were advantaged by superior caste and land-holding status in becoming the lords of reclamation whose "orders became dykes and dams" and "thoughts manifested as a thousand farmhands".

The lords of reclamation consulted astrologers to know auspicious date and time for reclamation. Before beginning reclamation, a *nirapara* (a wooden measuring vessel overflowing with paddy; a symbol of good yield and prosperity) was laid, a *nilavilakku* (holy lamp) lit, and prayers offered. Nayars offered prayers to family deities as well. The permit-holder of reclamation, upon signing formal agreements with his partners, informed each of them the men and materials he had to contribute towards reclamation. "Two big baggage-canoes, crowbars, and six Pulaya workers", a letter of 1914 written by a permit-holder to his partner notes (Kamalasanan, 1993: 57). Often, the partnership continued even after reclamation to undertake joint cultivation of the fields reclaimed. During the early days, costs of all inputs, including labour, were paid in paddy. If own resources were not sufficient, it was made good by drawing paddy loans from the lender families in the village. The government helped

with agricultural loans at concessional rate of interest and granting exemption from land-tax during the initial years of cultivation.

Reclamation was taken up during summer when water level in the backwaters dipped. It involved two major operations: building a circular dyke (outer, main bund or ring bund or *mata*) to enclose the backwaters area proposed to be reclaimed, and draining out water from the enclosed area. Dykes had to be built where water was 8 to 10 feet deep. Workers arrived at the proposed site of reclamation in huge country canoes (*kettuvallam*) loaded with coconut trunks, crowbars, and large wooden hammers. Some of the materials like bamboo, brushwood, and sand, not locally available were delivered by supply agents at the site of reclamation. On reaching the site, the canoe was anchored by driving a bamboo pole on each side deep into the lakebed and tying it to the poles. The next step was to drive coconut trunks in two parallel rows into the lakebed. The trunks were brought to the site ready for piling: vertically split into two, three or four, and pointed at one end. Across each split-trunk, a little above the middle, a crossbar of bamboo was fixed with a rope. As the trunk was immersed in water, two workers lowered themselves into water. They positioned on each side of the bamboo crossbar, held on to the trunk with hands and pushed it down with feet. The shout "aachi, ochi, aachi, ochi" as the workers stamped their feet on the bamboo cross while driving the trunk into the lakebed could be heard even from a long distance. The trunk was finally fixed by hammering with huge wooden hammers made of coconut trunk. Workers did the hammering standing in the canoe. Thousands of coconut piles were thus driven into the lakebed in two parallel rows. These were then fenced with bamboo screens on either side. The screen was made up of several bamboos, each crushed to a flat strip by beating with iron hammer and fixing these one above the other by tying to the coconut pile. The space enclosed by the bamboo screens measured 10 feet wide at the base and 5 feet at the top. It was inlaid with sand one foot high. Sand was a binding agent and the bottom layer blocked water seeping into the

dyke from below. It was then tightly packed with clay, to a height of four feet. Again, a foot of sand was laid. The space above this layer was packed with clay, leaves, and twigs (brushwood) to a height of 8 feet or more depending on the depth of the backwater reclaimed. A few workers descended into the coconut and bamboo corridor while others stood in the canoe and threw down clay, leaves, and twigs into the corridor. On each load of clay thrown in, the workers stamped their feet to make it even and tight.

All this while, a third set of workers were busy gathering clay. The worker carrying a crowbar (*kattappaara*) dived into the water to a depth of 10 to 12 feet, loosened the clay with crowbar, lifted it by bare hands, brought it to the surface and loaded it to a canoe. When the canoe was full it was brought to the dyke (Kamalasanan, 2005: 117-18 and Joseph, 2005). Given the arduous nature of work in the hot sun and under water – involving rowing canoes loaded with men and material, diving into water, staying in water for long, piling coconut trunks, hammering with big wooden hammers, stamping with feet — the workers were prone to fatigue. It was warded off and enthusiastic performance ensured by serving coconut toddy liberally at work. Shouts and cries, commands and queries filled the air; the ambience was festive (Kamalasanan, 1993: 30). After the outer, main dyke that encircled the large area was built, individual plots were demarcated by building smaller, inner dykes (*edavarambu*) within it. This was done after draining the whole area; during the early decades of new reclamation, with water wheels, and in a later period, with pump-sets. Over time, the outer dyke was reinforced by planting coconut trees. The backwaters, a state property, but practically a common property, was thus turned into a private property by enclosing it.

The kit of reclamation technologies comprised human sacrifice. It was performed when even after repeated attempts a dyke could not be built. This was done by pushing a Pulaya or a Paraya worker into the

unfinished bund and burying him under a load of clay. Human sacrifice was resorted to in the difficult, last stage of construction when the two ends of the dyke were joined. During this stage, hundreds of men worked together in a concerted and quick operation, inebriated by coconut toddy liberally supplied by the master. Also, human sacrifice was performed when a breach occurred in an existing dyke.

The landlord decided on the target worker in consultation with his Pulaya or Paraya foreman who would instruct his confidants to act accordingly. The dyke would be built but the victim might come back as ghost. The Kadiyazhathu family of Moncumpu was said to have been thus haunted. Their victim was a *moothaparaya* (a Paraya senior) who was visiting the Paraya foreman of Kadiyazhathu family and had joined building the dyke upon invitation. The dyke was 'reinforced' by his blood but a series of disastrous events occurred in the family. The landlord's seven and a half year old grandson was drowned; his pregnant daughter fell down and suffered injuries; a cow was found dead in the cow-pen. The astrologer who was consulted advised that the sacrificed *moothaparayan* had to be 'appropriately seated' in an exclusive shrine to ward off further untoward happenings. This was done and even today people pray at the shrine of *valliya kottungal* at Moncompu (Kamalasanan, 1993: 30-31).

IV

The State, Caste and Class in Reclamation

Before dawn breaks, dark, young men agricultural workers, dark dames of oil-sheen skin, old men, their physiques weakened by age, would be rowing [to work] in small canoes in groups ... They return in the evening against the backdrop of the sinking sun. As children we intensely watched the grooves that their oars sculpted in water.

(Kamalasanan, 2005: 43)

Going by history and physical geography, Kuttanad comprises two segments — old Kuttanad (upland Kuttanad) and new Kuttanad (lowland Kuttanad). The land in old Kuttanad was partly a natural formation in the backwater caused by the deposit of silt and sand by the rivers while certain other parts were developed through reclamation of shallow portions of the backwaters. Landless Pulayas were the original inhabitants of the region. As noted earlier, they occupied new-formed lands and reclaimed swamps and very shallow portions of the backwaters for growing rice. The landlords of old Kuttanad were Nayars and Malayali Brahmins (Nambudiris). They date back to pre-Travancore days when Kuttanad was under two rulers perennially at war – the chieftains of Chempakasseri and Kayemkulam. Nayars, as providers of militia, were in the close circle of power of one or the other of these chieftains.[9] They were granted land, often tax-free, in return for their services in war. A few Ezhavas also obtained land for similar services. Nambudiri Brahmins were granted land for undertaking priestly tasks. Besides them, temples owned land. The Kidangoor temple and its subsidiary temples, for instance, owned large areas of wetland in Pulinkunnu and surrounds. More land grants to Nayars and Brahmins – both local and Tamil – were made by the Travancore King Martanda Varma towards the mid-18th century. Christians newly entered the region dealing in coconut oil, supplying it to temples and landlord households, and buying back rice and coconut.

From the late 19th century, with the reclamation of deeper backwaters and the emergence of new Kuttanad, the composition of the landlord class underwent change. Professionals like lawyers and teachers located in small towns on the fringes of the backwaters invested in reclamation and became owners of vast rice-growing tracts. It was not merely the nearness to the site of reclamation that explains the entry of professionals. The state was an important actor in reclamation-agriculture. Backwater was state property and permission of the government was necessary to reclaim it. From the 1880s, besides granting permission, the state offered loans at concession rate of interest at four per cent and

allowed exemption from land-tax for the first five years. After this, a minimal rate of tax – annual assessment equivalent to one-half of the quantity of seed sown – was levied till the revenue settlement survey was conducted. The proposition was attractive but accessing it hinged on nearness to governmental authority. Rather than landless peasants far removed from the citadels of power, the already influential sections – as derived from their social and economic status – had much greater chances of getting the initial permission and concessions and taking up reclamation (Narayanan, 2003: 95-97). Usually the government granted permission to one person. He found partners and entered into separate *formal* agreements with them specifying the share of reclaimed land each would be entitled to. Communal and professional networking helped floating partnerships. This worked to the advantage of communities like Nayars and Syrian Christians with educated members who were familiar with the ways of modern government facilitating permission to reclaim.

Initially, the reclamation lords, like the landlords of old Kuttanad, were referred to as *janmis* (possessor of *janmam*) and addressed as *tamrans* (or *tamburans*, that is, royal lords). Subsequently, they were increasingly referred to as *mutalali* (capitalist) by the workers. From the 1940s when the workers began to unionise and a new grammar of politics was born, the lords were referred to as *kayal rajakkanmar* (kings of backwaters), and viewed as class enemies. Officials describe them as 'cultivators'. Scholars varyingly refer to them as reclamation-agriculturalists, landlords, semi-feudal lords, capitalists, and backwater-farmers. After Namboodiripad (1948) who characterised the agrarian society of Malabar as *Jati-Janmi-Naduvazhitham* (Caste-Landlord-Chiefdom) one may characterise the reclamation lord as 'high caste-landlord-entrepreneur' – admittedly a difficult compound term but capable of marking at least three features contributing to his specific location in the economy and society. Importantly, in the case of Travancore, the 'high caste' should include the Syrian Christians who had similar social standing as the Nayars and observed certain rules of pollution.

The numerical dominance of Nayars among the landed gentry in the new Kuttanad critically owed to, besides their prior landholding status, the links with the state. A pioneering, new reclamation undertaken by Eravi Kesava Panikkar, a landed aristocrat, was an outrage against nature. He chose to reclaim from the mouth of the Chennakari river as it joins with the backwaters. This involved the diversion of the course of the river by erecting a dyke at a point where it was 30 feet deep. Disregarding the protest of the people living on the other side of the river who feared that blocking the river would flood their land, he erected the dyke and reclaimed land. The local people filed a case against him. Upon this Raja Rama Rao, the Dewan Peishkar inspected the site – it later came to be called *Aattumuttu kayal* (river-blocked backwaters). The official chose to side with Panikkar and even hailed his effort. Subsequently, Panikkar reclaimed several other portions of the backwaters culminating with *Mathikayal* (literally 'enough of backwaters') (Pillai and Panikar, 1965: 17).

The reclaimed tracts were often named after kings, queens, and high officials as a mark of acknowledgement. The second block of backwaters Panikkar reclaimed, for instance, was named Raja Ramapuram after the Dewan Peishkar. The practice continued into later years and the tracts reclaimed by Murikkan, a prominent Syrian Christian cultivator, beginning from the late 1930s, were named with Chitira, Rani, and Martandam as prefix. It was also usual that reclaimed tracts were named after the original name of the backwaters part reclaimed or nearby village. If not named after the members of the royal family, high officials, backwaters, or place names, reclaimed tracts were often known after the number of partners involved in the venture – for instance *aarupanku kayal*, literally six-share backwaters (Kamalasanan, 1993: 53).

Many Syrian Christians who took up reclamation were engaged in professions, which helped networking and forming partnerships.[10] Partnerships were not confined to reclamation. Most often a *patasekharam* (a collection of adjoining fields forming one reclaimed

tract; a polder) was cultivated together, with each partner contributing to the expenses and sharing the harvest according to his share of land. Sometimes an accountant was appointed to track the contributions of each partner, the expenses and income, and to compute the income share going to each. Partnerships were necessitated not merely by large-scale cultivation and the requirements of collective management of land and water. Many of the reclamation lords were living in small towns pursuing varied professions and needed resident partners.[11]

Even with state assistance, own capital was crucial to reclamation. It has been estimated that 16 coconut trunks, 8 bamboo poles, 20 canoes of clay (160 tons), 500 cuttings of brushwood, and 80 labourers were needed to construct one *dand* (10 to 12 feet) of the outer dyke. A dyke comprised thousands of *dand* (Kamalasanan, 2005: 115). The state loans never exceeded Rs 5000. This could have met only a small share of the actual expenses. Reclamation was economical only in large patches. A newspaper report of 1911 noted that reclaiming an area less than 500 acres was uneconomical and that it required about Rs 50000.[12] This worked out to Rs 100 per acre. This is probably an exaggerated figure as the report was a plea for more concessions from the state and the editor of the paper was himself a reclamation-agriculturalist. In a report of 1901, the same newspaper had cited Rs 80000 as the cost of reclaiming 2000 acres – that is, Rs 40 per acre.[13] Obviously, the costs could not have risen by two and a half fold within a decade. Yet it cannot be disputed that even with low paid servile labour, reclamation of large areas was costly.[14] Further, a stock of money or grain was essential to cover wages and other expenses till the first successful harvest. This could be delayed by years if successive harvests fail, a strong possibility considering the uncertainties of cultivation with limited technology in a fragile ecological system. The ring-dyke protecting the reclaimed fields could breach in the rains and the fields re-merge with the backwaters, forcing a redo of the whole exercise of reclamation next summer.

During the initial decades of new reclamation, cultivation was carried out only once in three years. Later, by the late 1920s, the frequency of cultivation was increased to once in two years. While half the fields were cultivated, the other half was left fallow to receive the silt washed down by the rivers and saline water from the sea. This practice of cultivation was called *pazhanila krishi* (cultivation in old/seasoned fields). It necessarily meant that the cultivator should have enough reserve of grain and cash to cover the period of waiting. The possibility of surplus accumulation in Kuttanad was therefore not only slow but limited as compared to Nanchilnadu, the other important rice-growing tract of Travancore. The average productivity in Kuttanad, known as *nervattam*, was only ten-fold. *Travancore Banking Enquiry Committee Report 1930* noted that while the average yield per acre was 3500 lbs in Nanchilnadu, it was less than half, only about 1700 lbs in Kuttanad. Under these conditions, an alternative source of income from garden-land, agriculture elsewhere, or professional employment was imperative for sustenance and growth as a reclamation agriculturist.

Some of the earlier, Nayar and Nambudiri landlords with influence in government took up reclamation and expanded their holdings. Averse to modern education and therefore under-represented in professions, Nambudiris could perhaps access permission from government lesser than Nayars and Syrian Christians. In old Kuttanad, the Christians were mostly tenants to Nayar and Brahmin landlords. Many were sub-tenants of Nayar tenants who had leased in land from Nambudiri and Nayar landlords and temples. Some of them were tenants of state-owned lands. With the *Pattom Proclamation* of 1865 that granted full ownership rights to state-tenants, including the right to sell land, they became economically independent. Many of them formed partnerships to reclaim backwaters. Beginning from the second decade of the 20th century, at least a small part of the finance could be raised from small banking companies. These were mostly owned and operated by Christians in the towns of Kottayam, Changanacherry and Tiruvalla (Varghese, 1970: 119-20).[15] A small banking company

operated in Kuttanad itself, at Talavady in the upland. Yet, the credit market in Kuttanad predominantly comprised indigenous usury. It was the near-monopoly of a few Tamil Brahmin families. They granted loans to meet the costs of reclamation and cultivation. Many landowners leased in and leased out land at once. Distant fields may be leased out while fields adjoining own fields may be leased in. Also, additional land, sometimes even distant ones, was leased in to augment accumulation.

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Crucial to cultivation in the fragile ecosystem was a resident workforce, ready to the master's call. Both the high caste-landlord-entrepreneurs and tenants therefore maintained a permanent, core body of servile workers. They were originally slaves who could be sold (*janmam*), leased out for a long period (*kanom*) or hired out for a year (*pattom*) (Tharamangalam, 1981: 52-53). They were of Pulaya and Paraya communities, castes considered untouchable by their masters. With the abolition of slavery in Travancore in the mid-1850s, sale of slaves was banned. But with no land of their own, most of them could not leave their masters and therefore continued to live on the masters' land. These workers were engaged through the entire labour process — from the original moment of reclamation to stacking the hay after harvest. A servile, male worker was known after his master's family; thus *Chalayile Pulayan*, *Polakkale Pulayan* and so on. The lord's family inherited servile labour families through generations. They formed a productive asset, an extension of the land itself. They were transferred along with land. Scholars have referred to them by various names like agricultural slaves, servile labour, bonded labour, and attached labour. That none of these terms refer to their social positioning in the caste-system is a major lacuna. In the absence of a better alternative, I shall refer to them as 'depressed caste-dependent-servile labour' to indicate the context of servility, dependence, protection, and exploitation in which they were entrenched.

The services of the worker and his family were bound to be available for the master any time of the day or night. In return, the master was

bound to protect the worker and ensure the welfare of his family. The relationship was unequal every single way: economic location in terms of ownership of means of production, social location in the hierarchy of caste, and nature of interdependence. The relationship stayed in place through centuries because it was not merely dominant but hegemonic, especially as derived from caste. Kotha, the Pulaya worker was constantly advised by his father: "Don't ever forget the field you stand on, don't denigrate the rice you have eaten". There is the story of a worker committing suicide having come to known that he would have to work for a new master (Pillai, 1985: 34-35). The workers' loyalty was unfailing to the point of self-negation (George, 1987: A-145). While the worker would "happily" die for his master, no master ever gave up life for his worker. Gradually, fissures developed in the hegemonic framework that bound the master and the worker. By the 1920s, land-owning castes were being questioned by the lower caste resistance movements; and by the early 1940s, with the formation of agricultural workers' union, the moral reasoning of protection and loyalty gave way to that of class struggle.

V

Layers of the Reclamation Economy

Once I was walking on the bank of the backwaters
My eyes ploughing the rice-fields
And I saw and heard around endless tragedies
With a few light comedies thrown in
All turning into farces and riddles

(Paniker, 1985: 44)

The reclamation economy may be conceived as comprising several inter-connected layers. Some of these were internally differentiated too. The landlord class in Kuttanad revealed multiple origins and assumed varied forms. Their origins could be in feudalism, trade, usury or

professions. They assumed such forms as landlord-professionals, landlord-lenders, and even landlord-pirates. There was corporate, communal ownership as revealed by the Vadayar Samooham and Vaicom Samooham, which cultivated land mostly through tenants of own caste, Tamil Brahmins. Many temples owned land, which they leased out to tenants, including Christians. The landlords functioned in varied ways: there were landlords with all land cultivated by tenants as also at least one who owned and operated a very large area of land without a single tenant. The 'in-between' lord was the norm.

Importantly, the landlord's authority over workers was sourced not merely from possession of the ownership of means of production; it was socially derived from the hierarchical structure of caste. This was true as much of Syrian Christian landlords as the Nayars and Brahmins, both local and Tamil. Syrian Christians had similar social status as Nayars and observed the rules of pollution, even if not as strictly as the Nayars. Many of the Syrian Christian families traced their lineage to the Brahmin families which, it is believed, inspired by St Thomas took to Christian faith.

The normal rent in Kuttanad was three *para* of paddy for each *para* sowed.[16] As one *para* of land yields ten *para* of paddy, it translates into 30 per cent of the harvest. This was lesser than the rent prevailing in almost all other parts of Travancore where it was reckoned as *pathivaram*, literally "half of the gross produce as it stands on the land before harvest", that is, 50 per cent. In some parts of Travancore, the rent was even higher at three-fifths of the produce (Aiya, 1906. 150-51). In Kuttanad, however, as the calculation of rent was on land sowed rather than on the harvest, in case of crop failure, only the tenant suffered a loss. "The whole rent delivered at the door-step of the lord's granary seeking no excuse of crop failure" was clearly stated in the lease-deed (GoT, 1942: 146). The landlord thus shifted the entire risk to the tenant in a region prone to crop failure owing to the ecological conditions of cultivation. There were

variations in the rent charged by different kinds of landlords. The Travancore royal family insisted on a rent of only two *para* for a *para* of land, that is 20 per cent of the harvest.[17] The Brahmin landlord-lender families charged rent at four *para* of paddy for each *para* of land, that is, 40 per cent. Whether they were enabled to do so by the simultaneous control over the credit market is not clear because rent could vary according to fertility of the soil as well.

It is illuminating to explore some of the prominent high caste-landlord-entrepreneur families that emerged at different points of time. Located at Moncompu was the prominent local Brahmin family, Kulangara Illom. They owned 15000 *para* of which a marginal share of 2000 *para* was directly cultivated and the rest 13000 *para* leased out to 150 tenants (Tampuran, 2004: 57). Considering the average productivity in Kuttanad as 10-fold, 2000 *para* of field would yield 20000 *para* of paddy. As the ruling rent was three *para* of paddy for one *para* sowed, the leased out 13000 *para* of field would bring a rental income of 39000 *para* taking the gross income to 59000 *para*.[18] It may be, however, qualified that in Kuttanad because of the practice of *pazhanila krishi*, the income flows occurred only once in two or three years during the early decades of new reclamation. To consider another case: Chalayil was a Nayar family based in Kavalam. Originally located on the fringes of the backwaters, they were landlords in old Kuttanad with one branch of the family resident in Kuttanad managing the rice-fields. They began reclamation during the mid-19th century and reclaimed extensively with state patronage from late 19th century. They invested surplus from cultivation in the education of children abroad, thus producing a medical doctor and a diplomat both trained in England by the early decades of the 20th century. The family owned 20000 *para* of which an overwhelming share of 16000 *para* was directly cultivated and the rest leased out to tenants (Tampuran, 2004: 57-58). Alternative estimate puts the figure of total land held at 40000 to 50000 *para*. Even if we assume the lower figures as correct, it meant a gross return of 160000 *para* from

direct cultivation and 12000 *para* as rent. At variance with these two families in the organisation of cultivation was the Murikkans who emerged as lords during the 1940s. Originally tenants of the Chalayil family, this Syrian Christian family cultivated all fields directly, employing 15-20 overseers. The family reclaimed over 23000 *para* of land (Pillai and Panikar, 1965: 19 and Nawas, 2005). Especially contributing to their accumulation was the practice of annual cultivation, and the easy availability of cheap labour and the rising price of rice caused by disruption in imports owing to the war. Between 1939 and 1943, price of rice doubled. It further doubled by 1945 (George, 1987: A-146).

The wealthiest in new Kuttanad, perhaps, was a family of usurers – Kizhakke Madhom. They were among the nearly 200 Tamil Brahmins who were settled in and around Moncompu village. Like other Tamil Brahmin families in Kuttanad, the family was settled around a temple. The 'first' Tamil Brahmins of Moncompu are said to have arrived in the 18th century as textile merchants. They channelled the profit accumulated in trade to lending — first grain loan, and subsequently, as the economy was monetised, also cash. The fragile ecosystem that Kuttanad was, the incidence of crop failure, and therefore the possibility of default in repayment of debt, was high. The lands of defaulting debtors came to rest with the lenders. The high interest income also helped them to newly acquire large holdings. The family hardly cultivated any land directly. The annual income of the family, interest and rent together, has been estimated at 10 lac *para* of paddy (Pillai, 1985: 63). The debtors were primarily tenants but also some landlords. Especially dependent on them were the Nayar landlord families of old Kuttanad whose economies were destabilised owing to the break-up of the joint family system and the partition of family property.

Tenants in old Kuttanad were mostly landless. They leased in land from the lord by committing to pay rent. In new Kuttanad the holdings were vast and could not be cultivated single-handedly by the lord. Tenancy

therefore gained rapid spread. Importantly, the tenant in the new Kuttanad was not landless. Most of them owned land but leased in additional land to augment accumulation. There was a large section of tenants who did not cultivate directly and sub-leased to smaller tenants. Many tenants rapidly rose economically and became lords. Often both the lord and the tenant were debtors of the same lender. There were tenants who were richer than their lords. In terms of wealth, therefore, the borderline between the landlord and tenant was often fuzzy. If we define the tenant as one who leases land whether owning land or not, there is more clarity but differentiation among them in terms of land owned and possessed was vast. Very small tenants, however, were few as cultivation on a small-scale was uneconomical. What is more, tenancy was highly fluid. Tenants may, for varied reasons, give up tenancy and confine to own lands or expand to larger stretches of leased in land if there were enough human and other resources in the family to manage these. A vast majority of the tenants were Syrian Christians, and next to them, Nayars, and much less, the Ezhavas. The rich tenants were almost exclusively Christians.

I shall illustrate the complex category that the Kuttanad tenant is by profiling four 'tenants'. Kandathil family was of Orthodox Christian faith. They owned garden-land and plantations but their rice-fields in Kuttanad were mostly leased in. The family possessed rice-fields measuring 20000 *para*, which net in a grosss income of 200000 *para* every season (Tampuran, 2004: 22-23). Even after paying a rent of 60000 *para* the family was still left with 140000 *para* at the end of the season. The family invested in newspaper industry in the late 19th century and floated several banking concerns in the early decades of the 20th century.[19] Polakkal was a Syrian Christian family based in Pulinkunnu. The family owned 3000 *para* of rice-field and cultivated on lease another 3000 *para*. The gross income of the family was 51000 *para* of which 30000 *para* was from own fields and the rest 21000 *para* from leased in fields. They had ten families of former slave castes settled in the

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homestead as core workers and three overseers to manage the fields (Mathews, 2005). A case of rapid upward mobility is that of Outhachan of Kainady. He inherited 150 *para* of own fields and 600 *para* of leased in land from his father. Within a few decades, he came to possess over 7000 *para* of fields, including own and leased in land (Oruvattithra, 1977: 39).

There are pictures of decline too. A family on the lowest rung of tenants was of Poypalli Kalathil Sankara Kurup and Areepurath Parvathi Amma. Originally belonging to the landed gentry, the joint family had fragmented following partition of property. By the second decade of the 20th century, after a series of unsuccessful harvests, the debt-trapped family had been reduced to bare subsistence. The family was in such a state that it could not lease in land and had to confine cultivation to the tiny, inherited rice-field of 7.5 *para* (75 cents) of field. There was a member of former slave caste attached to the family. As his service became unwanted he was asked to find work with some other master. Unwilling to work under a new lord, he committed sucide (Pillai: 1985: 34-35).

Given the vast expanse of cultivation, the demands of reclamation cultivation, and the constant attention it required, neither the landlords cultivating directly nor big tenants could manage farm operations by themselves. They appointed *nottakkar* or *melnottakkar* (literally overseers) or *krishikkar* (literally farmers) to supervise cultivation. Like the landlord-entrepreneurs, the overseers were Syrian Christians and Nayars but of lesser means. The overseer played a crucial role in coordinating production. Only hardworking persons with in-depth knowledge of reclamation cultivation were chosen as overseers. The class position of the overseers was ambivalent. He could be landless, or possessing land through tenancy, or even owning some garden-land. Even if he had rice-lands either through tenancy or through ownership, it could not have been very large or far from the fields of his employer; otherwise

he would not be able to perform the time-demanding role of overseer. The overseer was paid a monthly salary in grain, usually 15 to 20 *para* of paddy every month. He was also given a canoe of hay after the harvest. He was entitled to food at the lord's house (Kamalasanan, 1993: 52). Over time, salary came to be paid in a combination of paddy and cash and later, in some parts of Kuttanad, entirely in cash. Depending on the extent of holding and the distance between the lord's homestead and fields, the number of overseers appointed by the farmers varied. Besides overseers, big landlord-entrepreneurs and tenants engaged a person to manage transportation. He was of a rank lesser than the overseer and invariably an Ezhava. He was known as *koyichovan* (*chovan* is the term other castes and Syrian Christians used to refer to an Ezhava). The tasks of the *koyichovan* included going to the market for purchases, getting food across to the workers in the fields, and supervising materials, loading all this in canoes. A sideline operator, he was paid much less than the overseer.

The workforce in the field comprised varied types of servile workers. The case of absolutely servile workers, that is, 'depressed caste-dependent-servile labour', has already been referred to. They represented the permanent, core workers. One of them acted as the foreman.[20] Usually, he was the head of a nuclear or extended family unit and an elderly but still active worker backed by decades-long experience of reclamation cultivation and calendar-knowledge.[21] He was called *talappulayan* (Pulaya head) if he was a Pulaya, or *moothaparayan* (senior Paraya) if he was a Paraya. Also, the landlord-entrepreneurs and tenants engaged 'own' workers on a seasonal contract (*onapanikkar* or *panathal*) for routine operations like draining, sowing, and transplanting. Many days ahead of cultivation, around *Onam*, the worker and his wife met the high caste-landlord-entrepreneur at his house and offered the customary tribute – betel leaves, arecanut, tobacco, and beaten rice. Upon this, the landlord-entrepreneur extended them a credit of Rs 10 or Rs 15

and 15 or 20 *para* of paddy. The loan (*velakkadam*) bound not only the couple but also their children to work exclusively for the landlord for the year. The loan sought to ensure their sustenance till agricultural operations began and they started receiving the daily wage in grain. The lords and tenants engaged casual labour for harvesting (*purathal*). Harvesting required a large workforce and large numbers of workers were drawn from distant shores of the backwaters. As harvest in large areas occurred at once, the landlord-entrepreneur had to ensure in advance adequate supply of labour. These workers (*purathal)* were mobilised through labour-brokers (*mooppan*). The workers were given an advance of two *para* of paddy during Onam. The workers accepting it were bound to harvest the lord's fields, thresh the stalk, and sun-dry and stack his hay before shifting to work in another lord's fields. The servile and seasonal contract workers were drawn almost entirely from Pulaya and Paraya castes, whom the lords considered untouchable. The harvest workers had a sprinkling of Ezhavas, not considered untouchable but lowly by the upper caste landlords. 'Untouchability' did not prevent Nayar and Syrian Christian landlords and tenants from sleeping with the Pulaya and Paraya women, most often against their wishes. There were many instances where women impregnated by their lords were killed by the lord's men.

Sing to the glory of man
O sing to the glory of man!
To the neighbourhood girl
whose belly is empty
he gives a full belly
Sing to the glory of man!
O sing to the glory of man!

(Paniker, 1985: 45)

VI

Producing Rice

Planting rice is never fun;
Bent from morn till set of sun
Cannot stand and cannot sit
Cannot rest for a little bit
Oh, my back is like to break,
And my legs are numb and set
From the soaking in the wet.[22]

The flowered dykes I will turn into gold working under the burning sun...[23]

How did feudal/professional capital organise production in reclaimed lands? The fields were vast, stretching over 100s of acres. An owner needed to have at least 50 acres to cultivate economically. Some of the lords, it was seen, owned 3000 acres or even more. Cultivation in a very large collection of adjoining fields took place simultaneously. A delay in any operation could cause the crop to fail in the whole area. *Travancore Banking Enquiry Committee Report 1930* was quick to note this: "Time is the essence of cultivation in Kuttanad".

Directly undertaking cultivation in the entire stretch of own lands was nearly impossible. Such conditions in conjunction with a stratum of owners who were absentee landlords even from earlier days, another who were engrossed in priestly tasks, a third section engaged in professions and resident in towns, and a fourth, for whom lending was primary and cultivation secondary, contributed to the system of leasing land. The vagaries of harvest in the fragile ecosystem and the consequent need to shift risk also could have prompted landowners to lease out. The fixing of rent in relation to land sown rather than yield, as noted earlier,

also points to the shifting of risk. Set against a stratum of landowners who wanted to lease out land, was the stratum of land-owning peasants with an urge to accumulate by leasing in. With the base unit for economic cultivation being 50 acres, entirely landless tenants could not have leased in land.

Central to the organisation of reclamation cultivation was a detailed division of labour based on caste and gender. I use the term division of labour in the sense in which it has been used by classical political economists and includes besides division of production jobs into operations, division into different trades (Adam Smith referred to the case of not only pin-makers but also porters to illustrate division of labour). The upper strata of the agricultural population, as already revealed, comprised the higher castes and community. The landlord-entrepreneurs were Brahmins, Nayars and Syrian Christians; the tenants were, save a few Brahmins, Nayars or Syrian Christians; even the overseers were Nayars or Syrian Christians. Any other caste would have polluted the landlords and tenants. While women could have held titles to the fields, the organizer of cultivation was mostly the senior most male member of the family. Women in the lord's household mostly attended to gendered activities within and around the home. Ezhava men were engaged in a variety of operations: toddy tapping, fishing, ferrying, and agricultural labour, especially ploughing, and sowing. Their women were mostly engaged in harvesting, threshing, and pounding. The entire work of reclamation was done by men of Pulaya and Paraya castes. Their women were employed in varied agricultural operations that followed.

Everyday during the agricultural season, the overseer arrived at the landlord-entrepreneur's homestead at about five in the morning. He reported on previous day's work, expenses, and weather, and outlined the day's work, labour and material requirements, and ways of mobilizing

these and sought the lord's response. Also, he would set the resident servile workers on various tasks in the homestead – like, feeding the cattle, cleaning the cow-shed, milking cows, and watering the vegetable garden. He would arrange with the *koyichovan* for materials, implements, and food or provisions to be brought to the field. After this, he moved to the field, sometimes accompanied by his employer landlord or tenant. He spent the entire-day at the field supervising work – standing on the main bund or the inner bund holding a palm leaf umbrella to protect himself from sun and rain. During harvest, which lasted several days, the overseer (and often also his employer-tenant) shifted residence to an *erumatam* (a watch-tower made of bamboo and roofed with plaited coconut frond) on a dyke by the side of the threshing floor. The threshing floor was a part of the field, raised and levelled even.

Agricultural operations in the reclaimed tracts began with ploughing. It was attendant with rituals. Paddy, rice, and coconut were placed on a plantain-leaf in front of a lighted lamp and a coconut broken. The head labourer then sank into the water and picked a fistful of clay, which was placed on the outer dyke (Iyer, 1994: 81). The dry field was ploughed twice in two rounds – length-wise and breadth-wise. Bullocks or oxen were used as draught animals. The soil of the reclaimed backwater was acidic and to neutralise it, lime was applied during ploughing. Ploughing was considered a skilled-job; steering cattle in the right direction and at the right pace required a high degree of skill. The country plough in use had three parts fitted together: a wooden tongue, an iron tooth, and a wooden grip for steering. Only some ploughmen owned draught-cattle and plough; often these were owned by the farmer who allowed him to use it. Big entrepreneur, who had stock of draught-cattle and ploughs engaged his servile labour to plough. Only if the stock was not enough, he engaged outside ploughmen. Sometimes the landlord or big tenant extended loan to the ploughmen to buy cattle. This was subsequently adjusted against his wage. Ploughmen worked till noon

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and were entitled to lunch in the employer's house. They were paid in paddy and a definite part of it was reckoned as the share for the bullocks or buffaloes if they owned these (Udayabhanu, 1998).

After ploughing, the sluices in the dyke were opened to flood the field. The field remained submerged throughout summer and the southwestern monsoon. It then appeared as a vast sheet of water indistinguishable from the backwaters that surrounded it. When the water receded, the field was again ploughed. This was a difficult operation, as the worker had to wade through waist-deep and muddy water with the draught bullock or buffalo. Following this, the outer dyke was repaired and waterwheels set up at different points. Alternatively, mechanised pump-sets were used. Drainage operations were conducted for many fields at a time. As water levels receded, the inner dykes and channels were repaired. The soil was then raked with a harrow, weeded, and worked into a soft puddle. The field wore a luminous black look then. Water was then let into the field up to knee-depth turning it again into a waterscape. Weeding was done before sowing. Women workers removed the weeds and in the process of working, turned the soil into a soft puddle.

Sowing was done after the monsoon subsided. Seeds, sprouted in screw-pine basket, were broadcast in water. Sowing was man's job. Workers walked forward all in a row, dipping their hands into the basket over the head and coming out with a handful of seed which was thrown scattered in the field. Three days after sowing, the field was completely drained and kept dry for a week. This invited birds like crows, teals, and eagles to the field. Flocks of teals would come like a cloud and descend on the fields. They could eat up the entire seed sowed within minutes. Drums were beaten to drive these away. Mostly, workers' children were engaged to do this. It was their unpaid apprenticeship to agricultural work.

Within a week of draining the field, the first leaf blades of the plant would be visible. Water was then let in, and when seedlings were about a month old, some transplanting was done to reduce the unevenness resulting from broadcast sowing. Transplanting was done entirely by women under the supervision of the foreman and the overseer. Women were formed in rows of ten to twenty-five in a field for transplanting. There would be endless rows as transplanting in all fields of a reclaimed area took place simultaneously. Women stood in the mud bent over the waist to transplant. The work was literally backbreaking. Standing in the mud for long turned their feet numb. It has been noted that women engaged in rice cultivation sang during work to relax themselves during hard labour (den Uyl, 1995: 225-26). This could very well be, but often it was not that 'spontaneous' and was as per the wish of the landholder. He paid a little extra wage to the woman who led the singing. One such lead-singer remembers that singing speeded up work. If there was *ethirpattu* (competition-singing) work was speeded up even more. The master could not however call the tune. Some songs challenged 'pollution' practised by their high caste landlords and ridiculed higher castes. Others were in the manner of friendly conversations with lower castes like Ezhavas, for instance, asking for good quality toddy: "Ok, if you give us watered toddy, we shall pay up with rice mixed with chaff" (John, 2003: 13).

The field was completely drained after transplanting. Following this, manure – cow-dung, green leaves, hay, and ash – was applied. Neither chemical fertilisers nor pesticides were used. The most common pest was a worm, the stem borer. These appeared when the plants reached *kaattaadiparuvam* (literally, the stage the plants are swayed by breeze). As water was let into the field and the level rose, the worm crawled up and positioned itself on the edge of the leaf-blade. The worms were swept away into a basket using a stick or a broom. Toxic plants like *cher* were used to drive away certain pests. Water was let into the field at regular intervals till the harvest.

To harvest, an iron sickle with wooden handle was used. The ear heads were cut below the flag leaf. In certain parts of old reclaimed areas, a deep-water variety of rice known as *kolappala* was cultivated. Its ear heads floated on the surface of water and were harvested from the canoes. Harvest anywhere in Kuttanad was a great spectacle. By then, the fields would have turned golden. Like transplanting, harvesting was done to the accompaniment of songs. As harvesting in large areas occurred together, it marked a great 'accumulation of bodies'. During harvest, the Pulaya or Paraya foreman was busy giving directions to workers and occasionally scolding them. "He believed that the lord's harvest is his harvest. During those days, it was as if he could even command the lord." Inebriated with coconut toddy, he was hyperactive (Kamalasanan, 1993: 49). The landlord or a close relative and overseer were also present during harvest. With the hearths in the temporary huts of the workers burning, the waterscape was lit at night.

Harvest-labour comprised both men and women. Both did the same work; the only agricultural operation where gender-based division of labour was non-existent. There was no gender-disparity in wages either. With Ezhavas also being a part of the harvest workforce along with majority Pulayas and Parayas, caste-based division of labour too was, even if partially, removed. Yet, spatial division at work continued, with the lower caste Ezhavas working together, harvesting a certain part of the field while the 'untouchable' Pulayas and Parayas concentrated on a different part.

Mostly, if not entirely, women did threshing. It was done either on the threshing floor prepared in the field if the field was far from landlord's house, or in the homestead, if the house was near the field. For threshing, a bamboo fence with the railing parallel to ground was erected at the waist-level of workers. Workers held on to the fence and stamped the stalk with feet. Children did not participate in threshing but they were

engaged to remove grain, one by one, from the cut stalk. The grain was winnowed and sun-dried on the threshing floor and conveyed to the landlord's house in country canoes. Canoes carrying hay accompanied these. If the house of the landlord or tenant was not far from the fields, the stalk bundles were transported there in canoes and threshed in the homestead.

The wages in general were paid in paddy. Half a *para* of paddy was the norm for a day's work. Women were paid only about two-thirds or even less than the wages for men. Importantly, male and female workers were discriminated not only in wage. While most of the work done by male workers, like ploughing the field or working the garden land, had entitlement to food, those done by female workers lacked this. For harvesting, the wage (*patham*) was one-eighth of what each worker had harvested. A smaller *para* than the standard *para* — called *coolie changazhi* — was used to measure out wage-grain.[24] Besides paddy, workers were paid in stalk. Wage besides, the permanent workers were entitled to three *para* of paddy on *Onam*, two on *Vishu*, and two on *Karkadaka Vavu* (George, 1987: A-144). All this would together add up to 50 to 60 *para* of paddy (Kamalasanan, 1993: 50). On *Onam*, the master gave some coconut oil, a small measure of common salt, and clothes. On marriage or death in the worker's family, the landlord made one-off payments. On death in the landlords' family, the servile workers had to cry aloud receiving in return grain, coconut oil, and provisions (John, 2003: 9). Occasionally, loans were extended to workers for special purposes. During the early days of new reclamation, such loans were not strictly accounted for. Supposedly, this was to be adjusted against future wage but more often than not, the master did not anticipate repayment (Pillai, 1985: 51). With the price of rice rising in the post-World War I period, the situation changed and even interest was brought into such transactions. While the loan was measured out in *coolie changazhi* the repayment was obtained in the bigger standard *para*, the difference in volume representing interest.

VII

Distributing Caste and Class in Space

As a child I had one great sorrow
It was that my village had no hill in it
but now that sorrow is gone, for I see
hills of wickedness all around.
I see the social man is the source
of all power, and not the individual.

(Paniker, 1985: 44)

A pioneering reclamation lord, Eravi Kesava Panikkar of the Chalayil family, was the great grand uncle of the Oxford-educated historian and diplomat Sardar KM Panikkar. In his autobiography, Panikkar remembers this maternal uncle and real head of the matrilineal household thus:

> *The first memory strongly imprinted in my mind is of my great grand uncle. I remember even now how he comes roaring like Panchu Menon, with a few others walking behind him in all obedience and respect, my grandmother (his niece) retreating to the interior of the house shivering with fear, and the house till then festively-noisy, falling into an abyss of silence.*
>
> *He stayed in a small bungalow a call away from our house and used to dine in our house. His dinner lasted exactly one hour, from five to six. Usually, when he sat down for dinner in the veranda, a large number of people gathered in the front-yard to submit matters relating to cultivation and happenings in the village...*
>
> *Those living in the present times cannot just imagine how afraid of him were other members of the family. If he suspects any nephews turning disobedient, he did not hesitate to banish them*

from home or order that they should not be served food. He disallowed even subsistence ration to Pazhoor Veedu (a branch of Chalayil family) because they erred in carrying out some wish of his. It is heard that he condemned a young nephew, a spendthrift and drinker, to lock-up for a week in the wooden cage used for storing coconuts with only one meal a day served to him (Panikkar, 1967: 11-12).

Houses of landlord families were huge, with a *nalukettu* (inner quadrangle), grain-house, and a vast homestead. "Every single tree was grown in the homestead", "we kept many cows, and there was no dearth of milk", as many members of the landlord families remember.

Moving to the homestead of a rich tenant, what do we see? To draw on the vivid memories of a Syrian Christian lady aged 90 years,

Our house was located on the elevated segment of the homestead. It faced north. The heart of the house was the ara (barn). The living space was organized around it. As you come out of the house, on the left but placed to the front of the homestead, was the cow-shed. It was auspicious to see cows first thing in the morning or when one sets out on a journey. That is why cow-shed was located in the front of the house. To its west was the cow-dung pit. We had three-four cows and five to eight buffaloes. Cows were kept for milk and buffaloes as draft cattle. To the right of the house was the buffalo-shed. Adjacent to this was the buffalo dung-pit. Beyond the cattle-sheds and dung-pits were the hutments of resident workers. We had ten worker families living in our homestead. Some were Pulaya, some Ezhava. Pulayas were not allowed to come to our house, nor even to the mittam (front-yard). After day's work they were served food at the border of the front-yard. Every house kept a few kinnam (bronze vessels) exclusively for them. We had 10-12 kinnam. I have heard that in earlier days kinnam were not used. The workers dug a small hole

in the ground and a leaf was placed inside to hold the food; water was served in coconut shells. In the rear of the house, right behind the kitchen was the ash-pit. There was a levelled space for threshing, and separate sheds to store hay, waterwheels for draining, and agricultural implements like ploughs. There was also an engine-shed, where the kerosene-run motor used for both milling rice and for draining water from the field was kept. There was a shed to shelter canoes when not in use. The homestead had a variety of trees – grown for fruits and timber. Coconut trees were, of course, the most numerous. The low-lying segment of the homestead was used for vegetable cultivation. The resident workers put in labour. They weeded, watered, and manured the plants. Vegetables that need not be watered were planted close to the kitchen. For their own needs, the workers grew vegetables around their huts. After the fields were harvested and water allowed in, the fields were leased out for duck rearing. The lessee paid in ducks' meat and eggs. (Mathews, 2005).

Unlike the houses of lords and tenants, the dwellings of the workers were not permanent. The huts (*maatam*) of the servile workers, those permanently attached to the landlord families, could be in the lord's homestead or in his garden-land or on the dykes encircling the fields – although never too far from the master's house. If huts were allowed in the homestead, the landlords took care that the dwellings were not built within the 'polluting' distance. Syrian Christian landlords were relatively more liberal with regard to 'pollution'. The semi-servile 'own' workers (*onapanikkar*) were settled on small patches of land scattered across the backwaters but they had to shift residence (*thara*) to the dykes during harvest. Such temporary residences were tiny huts with a bamboo-scaffold and thatched roof. The landlord-entrepreneur gave the couple fifty coconut-fronds and three bamboos to build the hut. The woman plaited the coconut-fronds for thatching and the whole family jointly built the hut.

CENTRE FOR TVPM.

The proximity of the dwellings of the servile/semi-servile workers and the employers' homesteads, and their dwellings and the fields, helped to stretch the workday substantially, pack it with a variety of tasks, many of which were unpaid. Settlement in the homestead ensured their services any time of the day and night. Besides working in the rice-fields, they worked in the master's homestead. Women and children did unpaid work in the master's home as well. They made screw-pine bags (for carrying wet or germinating seeds), baskets for various purposes, and mats for sun-drying paddy. Children took care of children in the master's household. They were also engaged in field to drive away birds. All this was unpaid labour. Workers settled on dyke were required to keep vigil over possible breach in the dyke, common during monsoon. The dykes were planted with coconut trees to reinforce these and as a source of additional income. The workers settled on the dyke attended to and kept watch over these trees. In return, they were entitled to a few coconuts when these were plucked. It was known as *kavaltenga* ('protection-coconuts').

The huts of servile and semi-servile workers were identical. These were made of clay, bamboo and coconut-frond. No Pulaya or Paraya had a house built of baked bricks. Good quality clay from the field was dug up and mixed with soil by stamping with feet. This was shaped into a wall with bare hands. The wall was just about one and a half feet high. A floor was made within the enclosed area with a layer of soil from the garden-land and topped with dry clay evenly flattened. It was then thatched with plaited coconut-frond spread over a bamboo scaffold (Paraman, 2005: 69). A former worker remembers that her hut was made of bricks but of unbaked clay. Her elder brother used to make the clay-bricks (John, 2005: 7). She was talking of the 1930s.

During harvest, weeks together, the workers' families stayed in *pantha*, that is, thatched shed built on the dyke close to the threshing floor. A description, although from a more recent period:

A pantha is a long improvised shed of width less than four metres and varying lengths made from locally available materials like bamboo and plaited coconut leaves. The shed is usually subdivided using thatched partitions and each family or group of workers is allotted a compartment in the pantha ... there is no flooring... (Francis, 1990: 13)

Living was hard. The harvest workers never had any stock of grain. Every evening the wage received for the day had to be turned into meal. The wage was received in grain. The usual practice is to boil paddy, sun dry and pound it. Boiling was time-consuming and sun drying ruled out in the late evening, the time they got back to their *pantha*. To overcome these problems, workers roasted the paddy and pounded it. A row of hearths was set up in the shed. Cooking was a difficult operation. No firewood was available in the vast expanse of water and therefore hay was used as fuel. This caused choking smoke in the *pantha*. Cooking was rendered even more difficult because the woman did it after a long, tiring day in the field. The workers had no way of getting vegetables or provision nor the money to buy it. Nor did they have time to fish. Unless there was a *vaniyappura* (literally a trading house; a provision-cum-tea shop) around, that extended credit or a 'shop-canoe' visited the site (in the early decades of new reclamation, both these were very unlikely), their only recourse was to eat rice with a few red chillies to go as 'curry' (Kamalasanan, 1993: 51).

The wage was paid in the field itself if the homestead of the landlord/tenant was away from the field. To receive wage, Pulaya and Paraya workers would lay down the screw-pine baskets in a row and step behind to avoid 'polluting' the landlord-entrepreneur/overseer who measured out the grain. A reminiscence from the late 1930s:

My father was a landholder. In childhood I have seen workers coming to receive wage after they had finished the day's work. The men wore loin-cloth and a small, coarse, hand-woven towel.

They would take off the leaf-cap and hold it in their hand as a mark of respect. At the edge of the courtyard of our house was a young coconut tree full of nuts. My father would stand under its shade and measure out rice. Women workers wore a small cloth just reaching the knee and another across the breasts... After working in the fields from dawn to dusk they were also required to do miscellaneous work in and around the lord's household. After all these, the worker couple reached their hut with the help of coconut frond torches. By then, children would have slept under the coconut tree or the banana plant, out of hunger and exhaustion. The wage-paddy was roasted, pounded, and boiled to make gruel. Children would be then woken up and fed. This sums up their daily routine (Kamalasanan, 2005: 21).

While the high caste-landlord-entrepreneurs considered Ezhavas as lowly, and Pulayas and Parayas as untouchables, these castes also practised distance-pollution among themselves and also within themselves. The Ezhava harvest workers, as noted earlier, kept away from Pulaya and Paraya workers while harvesting the same field. Certain clans of Parayas considered certain others inferior. Members of superior clans denied entry to inferior clans to their hut; they were offered food only in the front-yard where a hole was dug on the ground and a leaf placed inside. *Kanji* (rice-gruel) was poured into this. After eating, they had to dispose the leaf themselves as the host being of superior status would not do it (John, 2005: 6). This was very silimar to the way the higher castes served food to the Parayas.

The Bhagawati temple in Moncompu, despite its origins in Nayars displacing a Paraya settlement, was relatively 'liberal' to the lower castes. The temple is said to have been established by a section of Nayars considered inferior by other Nayars. Ashamed of their denial of entry to the temples in Vadayatt, Pullambalai, and Koical, they wished to have one of their own. Lower castes were not allowed entry to the temple but

a small, 'outhouse' temple was built for their worship. During the temple-festival, the idol was displayed for worship in the 'outhouse' temple for a day (Kamalasanan, 2005: 40-41). This assumes significance when juxtaposed against the Vaicom temple, on the other bank of the backwater, where the lower castes were not allowed passage even by the temple-road.[25] The practice of one-day display of idol in 'outhouse' temple was continued till it was rendered irrelevant in 1936 with the state proclaiming that all temples should be thrown open for all Hindus irrespective of caste or creed.[26]

To escape from the social disabilities of caste, many Pulayas of Kuttanad sought refuge in Christian faith. But the 'ancient', local Syrian Christians would not spare them:

> *Converted Christians were not recognised as peers. Their names had merely a new, Christian prefix and referred to as Ouseph Pulayan, Chacko Pulayan, and Souri Pulayan. These Christians were not admitted inside the church. They prayed outside. On death, they were not buried in the church cemetery. Their bodies were buried outside, in the prodigal's grave – unattended by priest, unaccompanied by cross and ornamental umbrella. Neo-Christians were not admitted to priesthood. They could not dine with or marry from other sections of Christians* (Kamalasanan, 1993: 38).

VIII

Brahmin as the Usurer

In November the ryot borrows paddy on the security of his standing crop. In April is the harvesting time and then the paddy is measured back to the creditor with 20 per cent interest. The creditor comes to the harvesting field with his own measure, and with a canoe to take the paddy due to him ... The creditor's measure, it should be mentioned, is 10 per cent bigger than the

one with which he measured out paddy in the preceding November, which added to the 20 per cent interest enables the creditor to make something like 30 per cent interest on the paddy lent but five months before.

(Aiya, 1906: 153-54).

The usurer traversed the legal, non-legal, and illegal domains of the reclamation economy. His role in Kuttanad rice-fields was so crucial that a specific inquiry is called for. This is especially relevant as the economic life of the usurer in South Asia in its varied aspects is only beginning to be explored. A pioneering attempt in unravelling 'the multiplex of power' of the lender is Hardiman's work on the usurers in western India (Hardiman, 1996). There are shared ideological attributes that contribute to the hegemony of the Baniya usurers over the western Indian peasants and that of the Brahmin lenders over Kuttanad tenants. It is even possible that the ideological sway of the *swami*, a Brahmin assigned with priestly tasks was greater than that of the *sahukar of* vaishya caste. Curse by a Brahmin (*Brahmana saapam*) was considered fatal.

Admittedly, the perspective as presented here goes against dominant scholarly readings that describe the Kuttanad lender as "the hero of the drama [of reclamation]", "financing partner", and "enthusiastic co-operator", playing a "constructive and creditable role", and practising "fair terms" (Pillai and Panikar, 1965: 92-95). It also goes against such myths as "not even a single commercial document was executed [between the lenders and debtors]", that Brahminism prevented the creditors from stooping "to the level of cheaters and liars", they "always adhered to honesty and truthfulness", and "did not covet the properties of loanees" (Iyer, 1994). Further, the perspective advanced here distances from the available reading that sceptically views the efficacy of intervention by Travancore state in the credit market. While its direct intervention in the formal credit market left much to be desired for (Sreekumar, 1995), from the 1930s at least, its intervention in the

informal credit market was critical, forcing monopoly lender families operating through over a century, like in Kuttanad, to close shop — thus freeing many tenants from severe debt traps. Again, especially interesting and not sufficiently examined in relation to Kuttanad, is how the specific ecosystem attributes of the region influenced the practices and procedures of usury, distinguishing it in many ways.

The case of a Tamil Brahmin family, Kizhakke Madhom of Moncompu, lenders and landlords, was briefly mentioned earlier while tracing the varied layers of the reclamation economy. It is said that even the government borrowed from Aandi Iyer of Kizhakke Madhom. Besides Kizhakke Madhom, five other families based in and around Moncompu – like Aanaval Madhom – were engaged in lending. Locally referred to as Moncompu *swamikal* (*swami* indicates Brahmins/revered), their first generation, as noted earlier, is said to have arrived from the Tamil country to conduct textile trade. During mid-18th century, when Martanda Varma, the Venad ruler, annexed a string of principalities and formed the larger princely state of Travancore, he turned the Nayar and Nambudiri lords into his constituency of power. During his times (1729 – 58), in Kuttanad too, several Tamil Brahmin families were granted tax-free land and settled around the temples. Their house-names like *Aarupara madhom* (Six *para* house), *Pathupara madhom* (Ten *para* house) and *Patinalu para madhom* (Fourteen *para* house) indicated the extent of the original land grant.[27] They were entitled to freebies like *namaskaram oonu* ('divine meal') from the temple. They sold clothes – dhothies, bath-towels, blankets – brought from the Tamil country, on credit to local people receiving payment in paddy at the time of harvest. The major clients were the landlord families who bought clothes for themselves as also for their dependents. When stocks ran low, the traders went back to Tamil country and procured additional supplies. With temples and *oottupuras* (free feeding houses for Brahmins) all along the way, such business trips could be undertaken at no cost. These could even net in some income by way of *dakshina* (cash offering by castes

inferior to them). From year to year they accumulated a good reserve of paddy as profit from textile trade (Pillai, 1978: 125-30). The profit accumulated in trade was channelled into lending. Known as *polikkadam*, this was seed advance to begin with, but travelling through cycles of debt, came to include other expenses of cultivation and sustenance expenses of the debtor and family. The lender received interest in paddy. As paddy had only a short shelf life – two-three years for the best variety — it was sold in the market adding to the finance capital for lending. Over time, the Moncompu *swamikal* acquired substantial holdings and was drafted to the topmost tier of landlord families.

The fragile ecosystem that Kuttanad was, the incidence of crop failure was high. A breach in the dyke would cause saline water of the backwater to rush in destroying the entire crop. The Monsoons may over-flood the fields with similar consequences. The need for credit was therefore high. Further contributing to the need for credit was the specificities of rice cultivation in the reclaimed fields. Especially during the first three decades of reclamation, the fields were cultivated only once in two or even three years, allowing the interval for the rejuvenation of the soil. This meant that tenants and even lords would often be forced to borrow to sustain themselves. Given the characteristics of the ecosystem and the consequent chance of crop failure, chance of default was also high. Tenants were therefore often compelled to borrow from own crop during harvest. As this went through a few harvests and a cycle of debts, the cultivator was pauperized and was forced to turn in any land that he owned. The lender often leased out the land to the former-owner himself and advanced loans. As land holdings thus increased, with a large section of tenants former debtors, their land lost but debt mounting. A substantial section of the Moncompu lenders was own tenants. The most pauperised of the cultivators were not able to remit even land tax and the government auctioned off their land. This was mostly bought by lenders who would lease it out to its former owner with a new advance. By the early 20th century, the number of debtors

had so much grown that they were queued up at the lender's house even up to three days before they could obtain the loan, their canoes waiting at the ferry-gate of the Madhom, the residence of the *swami*, to carry back rice (Pillai, 1985: 62).

Whether Tamil Brahmins supplied "75 per cent of the credit market" as the *Travancore Banking Enquiry Committee Report 1930* noted or "over 90 per cent" as a fieldwork source informs us, it is important to know what constituted the remaining 25 or 10 per cent. The trace is difficult to recover. There were several small lenders; how many of them were independent and how many were sub-lenders are not clear. To what extent the tenant's capital needs were advanced by the lord himself is not clear either. Still less clear is what proportion lord's advance bore to the lender's advance. Fieldwork underlying this monograph failed to generate answers to these questions. What is known is merely that lords financing the tenant was a fairly widespread practice in Kuttanad. Another grey area is the extent of interlocking of the land and credit markets. The landlord-lender families of Moncompu charged a higher rent than normal from their tenants. As noted earlier, rent could vary according to the fertility of the field and it is not clear whether this was an instance of quality rather than interlocking.

The Moncompu lender family advanced to the tenants (and to much less extent, to the lords) seed and sometimes also grain and cash to meet the expenses of cultivation till harvest. Before the spread of money to Kuttanad — which was essentially a post-World War I development in Kuttanad though certain other geographical and economic segments within Travancore had been monetised much earlier — all loans were in paddy. Loan was made mostly on the security of the coming crop. The lenders were hesitant to advance for the second consecutive crop – that defied defying the practice of *Pazhanila krishi* – as the second yield would be low.[28] On loan of seed, the interest was 40 *para* for every 100 *para* advanced; interest on other paddy advanced was 20 *para* for 100 *para*; and on cash, Rs. 12 per Rs. 100. This may not be read as per cent interest

because the credit period was mostly only one season, that is five months. To make things worse, the landlord-creditor cheated. Official reports of early 20th century note that the landlord creditor used a bigger measure when he collected principal and interest than the one he used to measure out the advance. The annual income of the Kizhakke Madhom family, from interest and rent, was over 10 lac *para* of paddy (Pillai, 1985: 63). The lender's men went to the harvesting field in a canoe, accompanied by a baggage-canoe to bring back the repayment in grain (Aiya, 1906: 153-54).

The average productivity in Kuttanad was reckoned as 10 *para* for one *para* of seed (*nervattam*). If the tenant-debtor took a seed advance of 100 *para* from the landlord-creditor and produced 1000 *para,* he would have to part with 400 *para* as rent and 140 *para* as repayment of seed loan and interest. If he set apart 100 *para* as seed for the next season, he would be left with a mere 360 *para* net, out of which all other expenses of agriculture and household had to be met. If besides seed advance, the tenant had obtained paddy or cash advance, he would be left with even less. Over time, Tamil Brahmins amassed vast holdings of land and stocks of gold. The State Manualist writing in the first decade of the 20th century stated that 75 per cent of the credit market in Kuttanad was controlled by Moncompu Brahmins (Aiya, 1906: 153-54). When lower Kuttanad alone is considered, their share was reckoned at 95 per cent (Joseph, 2005). This is very likely considering that there were no prominent moneylenders from other communities.[29]

Most vulnerable to the Moncompu lenders were those cultivators who had borrowed to meet the capital expenditure of reclamation. Successive crop failures caused them to default repayment of the loan but the creditor continued to make advance as this was the only way of recovery, even if delayed. From a government report:

> *After the sanction of the scheme for the reclamation of the Vembanad Kayal land during the Dewanship of Sir P Rajagopalachari, many of the Kuttanad cultivators, desirous of possessing kayal lands, entered*

into partnership agreements with the wholesale auction purchasers of these lands. They borrowed in money and paddy and reclaimed the lands. They do not seem to have had any idea as to what the reclamation would cost or what benefit they stood to derive therefrom. The first two cultivations of the kayal lands proved to be disastrous failures on account of breach of bunds. It was all a gamble in land below six feet of water, and most of the cultivators who went in for kayal reclamation had invested in this enterprise much more than they were worth. They soon found themselves in a fix and did not know how to proceed further. But the money lenders who were financing them till then, finding no way to realise the amounts already advanced, came to their rescue with further advances (GoT, 1932: 39).

Such financing could not continue forever. Over time, while expenses of reclamation and maintenance rose, the price of paddy fell. Not only the lenders stopped lending to persistent defaulters and initiated measures of recovery, the government proceeded to seize their land for non-payment of land tax. By the Depression years, the indebtedness attained alarming proportions. *Travancore Economic Depression Enquiry Committee Report 1931* noted: "there are individual landowners who are indebted to the tune of Rs 50000 to over a lakh" (GoT, 1932: 39).

Especially dependent on the Brahmin lenders were the Nayar landlords and Christian tenants. Though owning land and labour (permanent, servile), Nayars and Syrian Christians were often severely cash-strapped owing to the vagaries of harvest. While the Nayars were faced with precarious finance following the division of joint family property and borrowed for a wide range of needs, Christians borrowed primarily for agriculture. Further, both these groups were investing in school and university education of the younger generation, compounding their liquidity crunch in the partly monetised economy.

On every loan advanced, the lender insisted on a 'donation' of Re one to the local, Bhagawati temple to be borne by the debtor

(Kamalasanan, 1993: 43). It is tempting to view the bringing in of God as a third party as additional security for the loan. This could very well be, but worthwhile to remember the presence of God in other spheres as well of reclamation and cultivation. It is interesting to note that even Syrian Christian borrowers made payment to the temple.

Yet clearly, the ideology of Brahminism worked to the advantage of the lender. In Travancore the status of Tamil Brahmins was only next to Nambudiris, the local, Malayali Brahmins. Like Nambudiri men, Tamil Brahmins had *sambandham* liaisons with Nayar women, even though it was a matter of second choice for the Nayar families. The members of the Tamil Brahmin community were appreciated as being intelligent, bordering on shrewd – *Pattaril pottanilla* (Not a single stupid among Tamil Brahmins). They were also believed to be strongly motivated by economic rationality – *Onnum kaanandu pattaru puzhayil chaatilla* (Unless there is something to gain, a Tamil Brahmin would not dive into the river). A compelling reminder of the lender to the tenant was that it was a sin to betray a Brahmin. Repayment to the Brahmin was therefore portrayed as the first charge on income. Here is an extract of a fictionalised conversation between a representative of the Brahmin landlord-lender, a Brahmin himself, and a debtor, a woman, from a Nayar family that had seen good days. Nanga, the debtor, apprises Seshayyan, the lender's representative, of her difficulties and requests for re-scheduling the debt, to which he replies:

> *That's not fair. What's to be paid to Brahmin, that is to be paid first.*
> *You shouldn't cause wrath to a Brahmin's mind.*
> *Brahmin's wrath!*
> *It would turn everything into ashes. Children would die.*

There was only one child in the family. Nanga did not hesitate. She measured out paddy (Pillai, 1978: 60).

Interestingly, the decline of the Moncompu lenders was triggered by the weakening and waning of global capital in the Depression years.

As world-demand crashed, so did the prices of the export-produce of Travancore and other peripheral zones. Price of rice, international and local, too fell. During the early days of credit market, when the advances and repayments were made in grain, price fluctuations did not affect the repayment – as longs as the crop did not fail. With an increased share of cash loans, the debtors were unable to meet their repayment commitment on account of falling price. Many peasants lost their land to the lenders or to the government for defaulting tax. The state was forced to act. In 1931 the government appointed conciliation officers in different parts of the State "to help debtors to square up with their creditors on equitable terms". With the Debt Relief Act of 1940 "debts to be repaid within two years were reduced to 70 per cent, those to be repaid within six years to 75 per cent, and those to be repaid within nine years to 80 per cent, interest being fixed at 4 per cent in cases of money debts and 6 per cent in paddy debts" (GoT, 1942a: 110). Contemporary observers viewed the new legislation with surprise, as it was not quite expected that the Dewan, a Tamil Brahmin, would initiate measures that would seriously erode the interests of the people of his own caste. By the time of legislation, however, the Moncompu lender families had prudently invested in midland and highland plantations, service sector enterprises, and education of their children that alternative sources of income were assured.

IX

The Rumble of the 'Engine'

Brunton, the whiteman set up the engine
(Pillai, 1985:46)

In the fragile ecosystem of Kuttanad — with high water level surrounding the field, the backwaters prone to tides, and cultivation carried out at a level lower than the surrounding water-surface — constant vigil had to be maintained against any breach in the dyke both during and after its construction. After the main dyke was built, the enclosed

area was drained using waterwheels. The village carpenter made these of wood. The wheel, when set up, comprised two parts: the wheel proper and the base, a channel-trough on which the axle of the wheel rested (together called *chakravum patayavum*). The tip of the channel-trough could be closed with a wooden lid. The size of the wheel varied according to the number of leaves, always in multiples of two. One person, sometimes two, operated an eight leaves' wheel; three persons were needed for a ten leaves' wheel; and ten, for a twenty four leaves' wheel.[30] The wheels when pedalled, pushed water through the channel-trough at the base. After draining, the wheel was carried back to the homestead of the landlord or tenant, smeared with sardine oil, and stored in the *chakra pura* (wheel-shed).

To drain large areas, an array of waterwheels was arranged in the descending order of size one behind the other reaching into the fields to be reclaimed. For each block of backwaters to be reclaimed, two or three arrays of waterwheels had to be set up at different points. The wheels were set up vertically on a horizontal axle and a scaffolding of bamboo was erected for the workers to sit or stand on. On the topmost part of the outer dyke, a slash was made, and over it the biggest wheel was mounted, with its channel-trough resting in the slash. As the wheel was pedalled and water level dipped, the second biggest wheel was set up at a lower level and connected with a slash to the first. The second wheel pushed water to the first. As the water level in the enclosed area dipped again, a third wheel was attached at still lower level, and finally, the fourth, forming a stair-case like pattern, with the smallest wheel pushing water to the next bigger one, and finally the biggest one of all pushing the water out from the enclosed area.

The wheels, one after the other, had to push up water in perfect succession to the biggest and top-most wheel. A rhythmic, sequential pedalling of wheels was therefore key to draining. Many persons worked each wheel and their actions had to synchronise with each other. The person working the biggest wheel from its tallest point worked standing. He was called the *naraya chavittukaran* (literally, iron style pedal-man)

and the action was described as *soochikku nilkkuka* (literally, stand on a needle). All others worked the wheels sitting on the bamboo scaffold. The sequence of operation, successive pedalling through rhythmic leg-beat, was orchestrated by singing songs. These were mostly based on stories of the *Puranas*. A sample based on *Ramayana*:

Naalumaasam mala meete
Ramachandran Irunnare
Nallapole Kishkindhayil vanu Sugreevan
Baliye Sreeramadevan ... oh ...oh ...
Kolacheyitoranantaram
Vazhichu Sugreevaneyum ... aahaa...aahaa.
Taarayum koode... teyi... teyi...(Kamalasanan, 1993: 40).

There were also on-the-spot improvisations referring to local persons and events, real and imagined:

Kunnamkuri Pappichetta
Kandanpoocha kondo one
Aaru neentikeriyappol
Cheela kandille (Kamalasanan, 1993: 40).

Whatever the content, beat was central:

Thei thei tho karukuthaka thei
Karukuthi thei tho takathei thakatham (Pillai, 1985: 22)

Songs must have also eased, even if slightly, the labour of working the wheels. As the labour was hard, the wheels were worked with workers taking turns. Each gang worked for one *yamam* (*ezhara nazhika* or three hours); four gangs were needed for *nilappadi chavitt* — working through day and night. During those days when there was no clock or watch to know time, the workers ascertained time by watching the sun, moon and stars (Pillai, 1985: 22 and Abraham, 1980: 23-24). Alternatively, an inverted coconut shell, with a fine hole pierced at the bottom, and placed in water served as 'hourglass'.

During the days of old reclamation, only waterwheels were used to drain water. Even with an array of wheels backed by immense human labour, worked for weeks together, deep backwaters could not be reclaimed. The introduction of mechanical pump-sets that could drain deep backwaters and vast expanses in a much shorter time, therefore, marked a critical change. This happened within a few years of new reclamation, by the last decade of the 19th century. Locally, the pump-sets were called *pettiyum parayum* (box and cylinder) after their design, or simply, 'engine'. The cylinder was the inlet and the box the outlet. The cylinder was set up vertically and the axle of the propeller (*ilavettu*) inside the cylinder was connected with a belt to the motor. As the motor worked, the propeller rotated, drawing in water. Water was let out through the box. With the introduction of mechanical pump-sets, reclamation activity received a boost. While earlier, only small blocks of 40-60 acres used to be reclaimed, large blocks of hundreds of acres could now be reclaimed. Draining with a pump-set was substantively faster than working with waterwheels. An area that required three to four weeks draining with waterwheels could be drained in three to four days using a pump-set.

Until the time pump-sets were introduced, only a little over 1000 acres had been reclaimed. By the beginning of the 20th century, with the introduction of mechanised pump-sets, about 5500 acres were reclaimed. In 1903, Travancore government was forced to ban reclamation upon pressure from the presidency government of Madras which feared that reclamation was harming the Cochin port by piling up sand at the port's mouth. The ban was lifted only in 1912.[31] By 1931 another 13000 acres were newly reclaimed (Rammohan, 1996).

The first pump-sets introduced during the late 19th century were worked by producer-gas or steam generated by burning firewood. This gave way to pump-sets fuelled by kerosene or crude oil during the early decades of the 20th century. A British engineering firm based in Cochin, Geo Brunton Company, who were importers, builders and operators of

steamboats, introduced the first pump-sets. These were used pump-sets imported from Great Britain. It is reported that the first pump-set was tried out in the rice-fields of Baker, the British missionary and rice-planter in upland Kuttanad. Subsequently, the company opened a depot in Alleppey and hired out these to farmers. With increase in demand for pump-sets, new suppliers like Marshall Sons and Company of Edinburgh, operating through its branch at Madras, also entered the scene. Subsequently, the firms started manufacturing pump-sets locally, in Cochin and Madras, and began selling this to the agrarian entrepreneurs. Mostly a small group of farmers jointly bought and shared a pump-set (Rammohan, 1996: 76).[32]

The substitution of water wheels with pump-sets, besides redefining the physical geography of production by expanding cultivation through reclamation of deeper and larger expanses of backwater, redefined the social geography of labour. While water wheels were operated by servile or semi-servile labour, the pump-sets were operated by the company's men, mostly Anglo-Indians. They were called *maistries* (foreman). A local resident who witnessed the second-generation of pump-sets run by kerosene/crude oil remembered his first meeting with a *maistry* thus: "I looked at him as if he were a strange creature. He wore a trousers reaching up to his feet and an undershirt, both soiled with oil and mud" (Pillai: 1985: 47). The pump-set *maistries* were regarded as people with unique powers and treated with great respect. The pump-set hiring farmers invited them over to their homes and served them excellent food and beverages. The hirer provided them accommodation and paid their wage. Besides, during the initial days, they were entitled to all fish that came out through the outlet of the pump-set as also fish that gathered around the inlet (Abraham, 1980: 25). While pump-sets performed the same function as the water wheels, the status of the workers thus widely diverged. Over time, as farmers, individually or jointly, began to own pump-sets, Ezhavas replaced Anglo-Indian operatives.[33] Another interesting outcome of the technological change was the expansion of

the credit market. While no landlord or tenant might have invested in pump-set availing credit from the usurer, the reclamation of deeper and larger expanse of backwater using pump-set increased the demand for and size of credit.

A newspaper report of 1902 noted that with the arrival of mechanical pump-sets, waterwheels had completely disappeared.[34] This, however, does not seem to have been the case. These were still in use, especially to drain small, individual plots. Nor did mechanised pump-sets gain spread all that rapidly. There is evidence to indicate that even by the third decade of the 20th century, mechanical pump-set had not ceased to be an object of curiosity. It continued to instil fear in the minds of the local people. Children were especially afraid to go near one. Even elderly people watched it from a distance and with suspicion. There was a real basis to the fear, as the steam boilers of early pump-sets, used ones imported from Great Britain, sometimes exploded causing casualties. One such explosion generated this bit-song:

Vettikkari paadam thannil
Brunton sayippu engine veche
Pettennu oru pottu potti
Aaruper chathu veenu
Mattambumayile ... arinjeetuka (as cited in Pillai, 1985: 46).

Difficult to translate this; the song, re-sounding the rumble of the 'engine', is about Brunton's pump-set exploding in a rice-field killing six people.

As pump-sets gained wider spread, Ezhavas and Christians increasingly replaced Anglo-Indian operatives. Consequently, by the mid-20th century, the operative in western clothing was replaced by a figure differently attired:

Kunjachan had perfect figure, oil-dark body, and nice curly hair. He wore lungi and undershirt, and bore a Turkish towel on the shoulder. Under the lungi, on the left side of the waist he invariably

> *kept a big pen-knife, a bunch of two-three keys, and an iron chain. In the top in-fold of the lungi were a wallet, five or six beedies, and a match-box* (Vivekanandan, 2004: 26).

What is more, by then, in other domains of economic activity, several new technologies and a range of skilled workers had appeared. The pump-set operative began losing the importance he had once received. Hospitality of the cultivator who engaged him was still assured but was being extended grudgingly:

> *The lords wondered how much they should pay Kunjachan. The pump-set contractor had insisted that Kunjachan should be served first-class fish from the backwaters, fried, and a pot of coconut toddy right in the engine-room. The lords did not like the idea too much. Their reasoning was why should some Christian lad from who knows where be treated like a chieftain* (Vivekanandan, 2004: 25).

The *maistri* lost some of his earlier perks too, like the right to the fish that gathered around the pump-set. Increasingly, the right was auctioned off to others, with the *maistry* receiving perhaps a small gift of fish if the auctioneer felt so inclined.

X

Geographies of Defiance

The fields we reap today
Honey, will be ours someday.[35]

The workers in South Asia are faced with a twin-challenge. To emancipate, they have to defy the structures of both class and caste. Women workers are faced with a third, the challenge of gender-oppression. The first, major agricultural workers' strike in Travancore occurred during the last decade of the 19th century. This was conducted by the Pulaya workers

in southern Travancore. The strike was not intended to raise any economic demand relating to employment but to exert pressure on the higher caste landlords who refused, despite the state directive, to admit Pulaya children to schools. As the strike prolonged and spread, the fields lay waiting to be harvested, and the landlords were forced to succumb to the workers' demand even if grudgingly (Rammohan, 1996: 242-43). Whether the echoes of the strike reached Kuttanad is not clear. During the post-World War I period, a Pulaya worker in Kuttanad, long subject to short-changing in wage, called out: "Master, fill the grain measure to its full level" (Pillai, 1985: 41-43). This shout in defiance of the twin-orders of caste and class was heard before the first workers' union was formed. Defiance steadily made inroads into the cultural geography of paternalism and loyalty.

Possibly, the unrest among the workers in the coir weaving factories in the adjoining port-town of Alleppey — where one of the early strikes date to the first decade of the 20th century — had an impact on the ideological world of Kuttanad workers. In both Alleppey and Kuttanad, the lead to organising the workers was given by a lower caste resistance movement, the Narayana Guru movement. The movement aimed at redressing the social disabilities of Ezhavas through spirituality, education, economic advance, and assertion of civil rights. It was formally organised under the banner of the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. Most of the coir factory workers were Ezhavas, and the Yogam organised the first trade union in the industry during the 1920s. Roughly about the same time, the Yogam actively organised Ezhavas in Kuttanad and began representing them. Thus, when a Christian landlord molested an Ezhava worker, protests were organised in different parts of Kuttanad and the landlord was forced to tender a public apology at the instance of TK Madhavan, the leading activist of the Yogam. During the same time, the activities of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham, vanguard of Pulaya social advance movement, gathered momentum in Kuttanad. The activists of the Yogam and Sangham often worked hand-in-hand and addressed the question of social disabilities of the communities they represented.

The Depression seems to have brought economic issues to the forefront, prompting the workers to seek, incrementally, the support of ideologies and organisations espousing the question of class. Further, by the late 1930s, some of the worst disabilities arising from caste had been reduced. In 1942, an agricultural workers' union was formed in Kuttanad at the initiative of the communist party. The leadership of the union comprised prominently the Ezhavas, with Pulayas joining in large numbers, with the result that the public meetings of the communist party were referred to by upper-caste, anti-communists as 'Pulaya meeting' (Possibly such branding was also aimed to dissuade non-Pulayas from joining the communist party and the union).

Importantly, the emergence of agrarian radicalism in Kuttanad owes not merely to external dynamics: proximity to urban, industrial working class movement, Depression, War, weakening of state authority, constellation of social and political forces and events in the wider region. The fostering of subjective awareness hinges as much on the internal dynamics of the agrarian society and the manner in which it ties up with the external dynamics (Bouton, 1985). The role of landlessness and exploitation of labouring classes by the agrarian elite is rather too obvious to be elaborated. Less obvious perhaps, and certainly much less considered in the available literature, is the role of status distinctions based on caste and the attendant subjugation and exploitation, This explains why radical workers could find friends among tenants of the Ezhava community but much less among tenants of Nayar and Syrian Christian tenants.

The linear social narrative of a movement from 'caste consciousness to class conscious' as advanced in the scholarly writings on industrial workers in Travancore (Isaac, 1984) and in accounts of modern day historical processes in Kerala in general (Nambudiripad, 1948) does not hold good in Kuttanad. Such readings disregard sections

of people who sought identities other than class in an attempt to defy the oppressive social order. Many of the former slave-caste Parayar, for instance, sought to re-imagine themselves as slaves of God (Sanal Mohan, 2005) rather than as class-conscious rural proletariat and proclaimed that "it is lucky to be slave-children" (PRDS, 1996: 4). Slavery in this world was viewed as integral to the 'original' slavery in the other world as punished by God for the sin of deviating from the 'fundamentals':

The reason behind slavery?
Deviating from the fundamentals
For over five thousand years
Steeped in slavery!
Because of defiance of God's dictate
Caught in punishment
So much time has passed since! (PRDS, 1996: 5).

In suggesting that their slavery was a direct imposition of God, reminiscent of the ousting of Adam and Eve, they were rejecting the upper caste representation of their origins in the Hindu caste society.

XI

Nether Economies

Just because I have stolen a few things
Why should you call me a thief, a thief?

But you have stolen our clothes!

If I have stolen your clothes, your clothes,
It was only to protect your sense of shame,
It was only to protect your sense of shame.

You have stolen our chicken too!

If I have stolen "our chicken", as you say,
It was only to fry it and eat it,
It was only to fry it and eat it.

Then what about our cow you stole?
What about our cow you stole?
The cow, you mean?
Well, if I have stolen your cow, your cow,
It was, it was for me to drink its milk

Whenever one steals something good, something good,
You people raise a clamour for nothing
And dub him a thief, a thief!
(Paniker, 1985: 89)

While usury traversed the legal, non-legal, and illegal domains of the reclamation economy, piracy and theft belonged to the domain of illegality. Piracy was an act of landlords executed through slave labour depriving the elite of their merchandise, jewellery, cash and other possessions. Theft was a self-inspired act of slave labour on the lords' agricultural possessions. The former was often a quick route to accumulation for the lord but sometimes it was also a matter of his continued existence in the high-risk, reclamation economy. The labourer stole tubers and vegetables from the lord's garden for survival. This was restrained by the lord but also indirectly sanctioned by him as he knew that the labour would have to starve otherwise. The lords too cheated the workers. Only a heaped and levelled *changazhi* (a measuring vessel) makes a full measure but sometimes the employers short-changed the wages by measuring short of the rim. It was almost always the small tenants and landowners hard pressed due to the burden of rent/tax and interest rather than bigger tenants and landlords who were involved in short-changing the workers.

Piracy was common in the backwaters and rivers of Travancore even prior to reclamation. Besides individual operators, some of them social bandits, there were pirate-families. Some of the Nayar landlord families of old Kuttanad engaged depressed caste slaves as pirate-labour. Besides its economic utility, or even more than that, piracy was a political act of marking the geography of micro power in old Kuttanad. In new

Kuttanad, especially in the early phase of its development, piracy became a subset of the economy. Given the practice of *pazhanila krishi* (cultivation with intervals of two or three years), the risk of cultivation in a fragile ecosystem and the consequent high incidence of crop failure, for a landlord lacking alternative source of income as from professions or money lending, a stock of wealth was necessary to sustain and thrive in reclamation agriculture. An ideal form of wealth was gold, given its easy convertibility into grain or cash and ready acceptance as pledge. As waterways were the major mode of transport and Vembanad was a large water-body, merchandise and travel canoes continuously plied it. The landlords engaged servile labour who would lie in wait in the canoes in the dark and as other canoes pass by, jump out with flaming torches and pounce on the passengers depriving them of merchandise and valuables. The band comprised members of Paraya caste who were compelled to do this as slaves. The loot was surrendered to the master who may offer them a goodie or two to express his pleasure over their performance. Locally, the bands were known as *Theevettikollakkar* — pirates with flaming torches. Occasionally, the pirate-bands looted households as well. Besides the possibility of floods, this was one reason why the houses of landlords in Kuttanad landlords were built away from the banks of the river, canal and backwater (Kamalasanan, 1993: 28).

A story that does local rounds even today is about a landlord whose band pounced upon a couple who were on their way to the famous Siva temple at Vaicom. The band looted the gold ornaments of the woman and killed both of them. When the loot was brought to the master he was shocked to find that these belonged to his sister. He pledged not to indulge in piracy thereafter (Kamalasanan, 1993: 26-29). Such random occurrences of repentance and abandon granted, piracy disappeared only as the reach of law extended deeper into the backwater country and as reclamation agriculture became a sustainable enterprise on its own by the World War I.

While piracy was an act of the elite executed through the subaltern, theft was a self-inspired nether act. For the servile workers, wages, gifts,

and loans put together failed to ensure survival for the whole year. By the month of *Karkatakam* all stock of paddy with the workers' family would be exhausted. Because of incessant rain, all agricultural work would cease. This was a time of extreme poverty for the workers. Their only recourse then was to steal food. Cassava and vegetables of the landlord's garden were the most prone to theft (John, 2003: 7-8). Landlords knew this and occasionally even punished them but they also knew that the pittance of the wage paid had rendered this inevitable for the workers. The labour that grew these was theirs and often it was unpaid too (Joseph, 2005). May be there was a practical difficulty too: the incessant rain of *Karkatakam* rendered monitoring difficult for the landlord.

Occasionally, cows were stolen for meat. The landlord's men came searching for the cow and the worker would be asked whether he/she had seen it. The worker's answer was couched yet clear:

The cow passed the 'turmeric' rock land, went past the 'salt' stream country, beyond the 'chilli' forest ... whether it went into the 'tongue' country I am not sure (John, 2003: 8).

XII

Possible Futures of Economic History

Until the recent past, the development of economic history of South Asia was constrained by rival claims to authentic representation. On one side were political economists and historians, who acknowledged their left-wing ideological position and on the other were economists of the neo-classical persuasion, who presented themselves as apolitical but revealed politics in their concerns, modes, and inferences of inquiry. The two schools continuously dissented with each other, and in a steady attempt to outwit the other, advocated more sophisticated modes of analysis: with larger sets of data and varied statistical techniques, theories of dependency and world-system analysis, resource economics and path-dependency. Yet, working with old apparatus of historiography

designed to study large phenomena, macro processes, and big events, both the schools constructed grand narratives of the economy that tended to marginalise regional economies, micro processes, and alternative histories. If at all, these set the cast for regional histories albeit in the mould of the grand narrative – generating merely derivative histories.

What led to an impasse in the economic history of South Asia seems to have been the dominance of the binary opposition between the two schools and the consequent 'path-dependent' monologues – rather than the dominance of a specific school of historiography, the political economic school, as has sometimes been argued (Roy, 2004). The two schools while seemingly dissenting with each other, were unknowingly united in the epistemology of objectively knowing "what actually happened in the past". Further, both subscribed to a shared materialist-determinist view of the past. Both produced economic histories that failed to explore economic history as a lived experience of the people. The inevitable outcome of the duopoly in economic historiography was that innovations in South Asian historiography — like the intervention by Peter Robb in the early 1980s or the ideas of the Subaltern Studies collective emanating from Calcutta and the agrarian studies of James C Scott and others issuing from Yale, or of Jan Breman and associates — were allowed entry only grudgingly, if at all. The micro regions, processes, and actors and the economic dimensions of the non-economic were thus left out from the study of economic history of South Asia. Those works which considered some of these aspects, say environment, was distanced as a different branch, environmental history. Likewise, the scholars who inquired into the ideological dimensions of economic variables positioned themselves in cultural studies and social anthropology — or in history but without the prefix economic.

This monograph visualised one among the possible futures of economic historiography of South Asia. It hypothesised an economic historiography that explores micro regions, actors, processes,

relationships, technologies, ideas, and commodities tracking their passage through time. Such economic historiography strives to gain an understanding of economic traces hitherto unrecognised but also through them new, alternative insights into larger processes. The hypothesised course of historiography transgresses the boundaries of conventional economic history, whether of the Marxist political-economic or neo-classical kind, and conceives a multi-layered narrative of economic life in the past.[36] It repositions economic history as human science. While the project shares many attributes of ethnographic history, it recognises that ethnographic history could be as limiting and discipline-bound as economic history is, and therefore advocates drawing inputs from varied disciplines. This involves the use of transdisciplinary frameworks spanning over a range of disciplines — ethnography, ecology, cultural geography and others. The transdisciplinary framework as suggested here does not displace economic theorising, especially political-economic, that approximates economic sociology. On ground, the project requires use of folk sources, a re-prioritisation of archival sources and re-reading these, and demands sustained fieldwork.

The monograph sought to demonstrate the case for a new, transdisciplinary project of economic change by focussing on a micro region. The micro region chosen was the coastal rice-lands in southwest India, Kuttanad in the former princely state of Travancore, currently a part of Kerala State. The rice-fields of Kuttanad were created by reclaiming — enclosing and draining the backwater — and cultivation was carried out below the sea level. The monograph focused on the period beginning from the late 19th century extending to the 1940s. The study viewed the creation of Kuttanad rice lands in the context of growing commercialisation of the Travancore economy and its rapid integration with the world-economy beginning from the mid-19th century. The use of natural and human resources for non-food production for exports turned Travancore into a food-shortage region. High food prices would have, by pushing up wages, rendered its exports less price-competitive in the fiercely

competitive world-market. The state sought to resolve food shortage and keep food prices in check in three ways: by rice imports from the Asian trading system, the propagation of cassava and the creation of the new rice-land, lower Kuttanad.

While the temporality of the Kuttanad rice-economy thus significantly overlaps with the temporalities of Travancore and global economies, it would not be appropriate to structure the varied developments in terms of a single, linear, regnant time. Cultivation practices, technologies, labour regimes, monetisation, and trade circuits generate their own temporalities and geographies. While 'free' labour emerged in the cash crop plantations and coir weaving factories from the mid-19th century, a system of servile labour tantamount to bonded labour continued in the rice-lands of Kuttanad well into the 20th century. Likewise, in Kuttanad, technological change, monetisation, and unionisation was rather delayed in comparison to other segments of Travancore economy. Indeed, it is such differences in temporalities and geographies that mark off micro history as explored in this monograph.

The specificities of cultivation in the fragile ecosystem of Kuttanad tended to bring together a range of actors – the state, landlords, tenants, overseers, foremen, labour brokers, material supply agents, usurers, transport-men, servile and semi-servile workers – a set of practices – entrepreneurial forms like parterships, contractual labour agreements, rent committment not linked to harvest, credit dependence – specific technologies – for reclamation, draining, pest control – and strategies of accumulation and livelihood – piracy, theft, short-changing.

Within the rice-bowl of Kuttanad, we thus find not a single mode of production but varied forms of an old-new economy. There were landlords from the pre-reclamation phase and new, landlord-professionals and landlord-lenders. Tenants were an even more complexly varied range including those who were lords and tenants at once. There were different

kinds of servile labourers; there was free labour too. The economy, with components like fraudulent usury, piracy, and theft traversed legal, non-legal, and illegal domains. The kit of technologies of production included human sacrifice. The same operation, draining water from reclaimed areas, conducted by water wheels when replaced with pump-sets, redefined not only the physical geography of production but also the social geography of labour. Power relationships, old and new, bounded economy and society. The power of the pirate-family was physical might sourced through organising slave labour advantaged by their position of being higher caste, aristocratic Nayars and that of the usurer was critically derived from his 'purity' as a Brahmin. Liaison with the state was crucial in the sustenance of the power.

To conclude, this monograph is not intended to preclude the possibility of other futures in writing the economic past of South Asia. New objects of study may be identified and varied kinds of transdisciplinary frameworks constructed with different permutations and combinations of human sciences. While the object of this monograph was the micro region, processes, and actors it does not preclude the possibility of other kinds of narratives – including grand narratives of economic change if the aim is to understand the central tendencies of an economic epoch of a large region. But then, in future, grand narratives themselves might be written in unimaginably new ways. The signs are visible.

NOTES

1 An official committee of 1952 noted: "Rice imports into Travancore began over a century ago" (GoT-C, 1952: 32). For a pioneering enquiry into rice imports and its implications for plantation production and local rice cultivation in Travancore see S Uma Devi (1984).

2 Travancore's population was 12.63 lacs in 1854; it rose to 40.06 lacs by 1921. These figures include plantation workers also.

3 In the absence of information on possible disguised unemployment in agriculture, it would be difficult to say whether the shifting of workers from farm to factory and spinning site reduced production of food.

4 The state policy on cultivation of cassava was divergent across the world. There were governments that *forbid* its cultivation as also those that *ordered* peasant cultivators to grow it (Jones, 1969: 4).

5 *Census of India (Travancore) 1921 Report*, Appdx 1: 157.

6 "Labourers in the tea and rubber estates of Devicolam and Peermade were formerly fed on dried tapioca chips bought from Changanacherry market. But in the last two years estate owners have found it profitable to grow tapioca for sale among labourers. Even the Tamil labourers who formerly eschewed tapioca have come to relish it greatly" (GoT-C, 1952: 18).

7 Certain varieties of rice were imported even earlier. Certain varieties were exported too (to other parts of British India). There could have been occasional large imports as well. The new situation Travancore was pushed into was that of a chronic, net importer of rice.

8 *Census of India (Travancore) 1911* records three rice-mills; all three were run by steam-power.

9 Ezhavas and Pulayas also supplied militia to local chieftains. For instance, most of the militia of the chieftain of Purakkad Raja comprised Ezhavas (Verghese, 1982: 87. 88ff).

10 There was one Ezhava who was granted permission to reclaim but this was before active state support began in the 1880s. He was a member of the Cherukalil family who wished to join some Nayars in partnership to reclaim backwater. When the Nayars turned down his request, he applied to the government on his own and was granted permission to reclaim 200 acres (Kamalasanan, 1993: 54).

11 Of the prominent landlord-entrepreneurs who were the founding members of the Kuttanad Karshaka Sanghom (Kuttanad Agriculturists' Association), there was a medical doctor, five lawyers, and one professor. All of them were either Nayars or Syrian Christians (Oruvattitra, 1977: 44).

12 'Nelkrishi' (Rice cultivation) (Editorial). *Malayala Manorama* (Kottayam) 16 September 1911.

13 'Kuttanadukarude Oru Sankadam' (A misery of the people of Kuttanadu). *Malayala Manorama* (Kottayam) 12 January 1901. The report centres on the breach of a new dyke encircling 20000 *para* of fields after being sown. The main partners in this disastrous venture included Adv. Neelakanda Pillai and Chalayil Panikkar.

14 It must have been still cheaper than buying cultivable rice-fields. During the early 1960s "the going price of rice-fields ... was about Rs. 500 to Rs. 700 per acre". It was also noted that the initial investment in reclamation could be recouped "from the net income of one or two croppings if everything went well" (Pillai and Panikar, 1965: 17-18).

15 This could have also guarded them from falling prey to the Brahmin lenders who charged exorbitant rates of interest. While the Brahmin lenders at Moncompu charged interest of 60 to 70 per cent, banks charged from 9 to 24 per cent (Kabir, 2002: 72).

16 There was variation according to the fertility of the field but three *para* was the most prevalent rate.

17 To collect rent and tax, the Travancore government set up state barns in Kuttanad. These, locally called *nelppurakal* (house of paddy), were located in Edathua, Nedumudi, Kavalam and other parts of new Kuttanad. Besides, there was a central store in Ambalappuzha. Each state barn employed four persons: *nelppuravicharippukaran* (barn-manager), *pillai* (accountant) and two 'measurers' (*masappadikkar*) (Harippad: 1998: VI-VII).

18 Kulangare Illom is said to have been engaged in lending; if this is indeed true, it is surprising because local Brahmins are not generally associated with this activity, at least in the modern period. Perhaps, as was true of landlords of all communities in Kuttanad, the family lent to own tenants.

19 The family launched the newspaper *Malayala Manorama* in 1890 and set up the Travancore National Bank in 1912. The family history lists over ten members as involved with floating different banking concerns (Kudumba Charitra Committee, 1989: 89)

20 Interestingly, rice cultivation in South Carolina was organised in similar lines through overseers and drivers.

21 Most historians of Kerala attribute calendar-knowledge to upper-castes, especially Brahmins; If calendar knowledge means knowledge of astronomy obtaining in Sanskrit texts, these historians are right. I conceive calendar knowledge as an intimate knowledge of weather and climate and the implications for cultivation; such knowledge is also predictive of weather and climate.

22 A Filipino song cited in Coclanis, 1993: 1050.

23 Song from *Randitangazhi* (Two measures of rice) (1958), a social realist Malayalam movie set in Kuttanad.

24 The standard *para* was approximately 10 litres. Coolie *changazhi* measured 8 litres or even less (George, 1987: A-149 ff.).

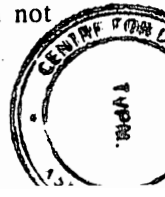
25 Vaicom became a site of struggle in 1924 with support from a range of leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, EV Ramaswamy Naicker, Narayana Guru, John Joseph, and TK Madhavan, and organisations, among others, the Indian National Congress, Akali Dal, Dravida Kazhakam, and Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham and others participating, with the Congress in the lead role. It was demanded that the temple-road should be thrown open for use by any caste.

26 The state proclamation was influenced by a range of factors: among others, the threat of lower castes to convert to non-Hindu systems of faith like Christianity, Buddhism, and Sikhism; the attempts to construct a Hindu identity by the Hindu Mahasabha and their forging an alliance with the princely, Travancore state.

27 *Para* is a measure of both rice and the field it is grown. One *para* of paddy equals 20 lbs (GoT, 1930). One *para* of land indicates the area where one *para* of seed is sown. This is equal to 10 cents. Ten *para* of land make one acre.

28 During World War II, in response to the state call for increasing production by regular, annual cultivation, a member of the Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly pointed out: "In Kuttanad, if cultivation is undertaken during two consecutive years, the second crop would be much less than the first ... Cultivators are dependent on borrowings for cultivation. For *pazhanila krishi,* as a bumper crop is assurred, lenders are enthusiastic to finance. They hesitate to advance for a consecutive second year's crop as they believe that it would not reap much yield" (GoT, 1941: 859).

29 *Travancore Banking Enquiry Committee Report 1930* noted that besides Moncompu family "there are a large number of small moneylenders who deal with small capital" but did not elaborate.



30 The number of persons per wheel could vary within a small range. Wheels of other sizes were also in use but not very common. These included wheels with four, thirty-two, or thirty-six leaves. Four leaves' wheel could be operated only by one person and was useful only for draining small, individual plots after reclamation of large areas using an array of bigger waterwheels.

31 It is not clear how effective the ban was or whether the Travancore government surreptitiously allowed reclamation if the scale was not too big to attract the attention of the government in Madras. There is indeed some evidence to this. See, 'Nelkrishi' (Rice Cultivation) (Editorial). *Malayala Manorama* (Kottayam) 16 September 1911.

32 In 1909, Kumarakam Karshaka Sanghom (Association of the farmers of Kumarakam) under the presidentship of Baker decided to buy four pump-sets. Shares, each worth British Indian Rs 100, were issued for the purpose. During the same year, a reclamation agriculturist bought a pump-set on his own. This was Alangattu Tachil Lonan Vareed paying Rs 7700 (Rammohan, 1996: 76).

33 There were also people from other parts of India. For instance, one Mr Rao, a Telugu, was for long an operative in Kuttanad (Alexander, Ninan and Alexander, 1991: 74).

34 *Nazrani Deepika* (Kottayam) 8 October 1902.

35 From a song penned by ONV Kurup for the play *Ningalenne Communist Aaakki* (You made me a Communist) (1952).

36 Throughout the monograph I have used the expression economic life to include all three layers of the economy as delienated by Fernand Braudel. It thus comprises material life (extremely elementary economy), economic life (market or micro capitalism), and capitalism ('real' capitalism).

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